

Dharma Blogs

2019 Summer



by Michael Erlewine

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2019 SUMMER
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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. These blogs were from the Summer of 2019 posted on Facebook and Google+.

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LIFE TRAJECTORIES

July 4, 2019

Thanks for all the well-wishes and support. I am sorting it all out. And this blog is sort of an ad-lib from what I wrote yesterday. My careening health-curve, heading gradually south, keeps me reminded of impermanence. I always joke to myself that impermanence is the smelling-salts of the dharma. Age is such an efficient reminder.

In fact, impermanence can be so strong that it prys my little fingers from any attachments and inserts me once again in what I jokingly call “free-fall,” as in: I’m in free-fall through space as time expands as it runs out. LOL.

In essence, I don’t have enough time to re-attach before one health crisis or another takes precedence over entertainment. A rolling stone gathers no moss, and god knows I have been on a roll for several years with health issues.

I keep imagining that things will level off enough that I can project a level plane as a future, but, you know, that never seems to happen, at least not lately. Every time I set up my house of cards, it gets collapsed or blown away by the winds of change and I continue to roll on downhill toward the rabbit hole.

These health conditions are one way to remove attachments, but not what I had imagined. LOL. Only a fool would assume that we can set up shop on the Titanic and expect a normal life again. Every which way that I turn points to finishing up whatever I can and not to hazard an investment in a steady-state of affairs. That option is no longer supported. LOL.

It’s like, after a certain age, we are on a sinking ship that is slowly filling with water. All of my time is spent bailing out the water and I have less and less time to plan anything that resembles a future or anything permanent. The future runs out of its present.

All of this is just common sense and not rocket science. It’s the essence of conservatism to attempt to hang on to the present so that it does not fade away. So much of the

beautiful is lost like sand through our fingers. Reality just cannot support our former lifestyle. We age. LOL.

I keep coming around and back to the thought that we are happy when we remember the foolishness of being sad. And, increasingly, I find that what with a little wit will wear and last, is lost later letting fast.

And like a rollercoaster, we are funneled toward eternity. As for me, the best I can do is add my aye, say my yeah, and confess my yes.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

July 5, 2019

[Since I seem to be in flux (and the weekend is a holiday), let's just muse a bit. The fireworks kept me up half the night and its 89-degrees out this minute, so kick back and we can have a talk.]

At my age, the point of anything needs to be questioned? It's just so hard to get my attention when I'm playing in the sandbox. LOL. However, health issues take no prisoners; they just say "No" to my blithely journeying on and on as if I am going to live forever.

"Wake up! Wake up, friend Owl."

There is a point in life where there is little point in endlessly starting new projects. Rather, it's time to put away my toys and spend a little time getting ready to transition out of here. LOL. A good sign of this is when we find ourselves ratcheting rapidly downward rather than the reverse. There is a message there. For me, the message is the following song, "Sweet Days," as written and sung by my daughter May Erlewine. This is exactly how I feel most of the time. Join me in giving it a listen please.

MAY ERLEWINE: "SWEET DAYS"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_z0Nxyu2Gk

"Nero fiddled while Rome burned" comes to mind. I have my hobbies, mostly just photography; and "Whistling in the dark" is my specialty. But really, there comes a time for each of us to just take a pause and look around. I call it the point of no return. What's happening? As they say, "Let's take a look-see." The time for chasing after rainbows has passed.

It's like finally looking up after a lifetime of studying ourselves with a magnifying glass. "What's up, Doc?" It's clear that my health is not going to allow me to just happily sleep on as I have for most of my life. These health events rudely awaken me from my slumber and jettison me directly into the void, where I assume the appearance of a sore thumb. LOL.

Being of the adaptable human race, I can get into almost any view, given enough time. I'm too busy extending myself down the corridor of life in a straight line, while in fact I'm on the downward arc of a steepening trajectory. And then comes a health event and I'm contemplating the reality of aging and an imminent transitioning. I can see it both ways and do.

My point here, if there is one, is that diminishing options make for fewer choices. How does it feel to be on the other end of the great divide, the far side of life?

From a dharmic point of view, my innate Awareness is no different than when I was young. If anything, I am clearer and more lucid than I have ever been. What does that tell us?

It tells me that this Awareness is unaffected by age or events. It's like the very dharmic movie "Groundhog Day" with actor Bill Murray. No matter what happened in his life, he was good-to-go the next morning. Now, if I only could lay back and pass through death with no fear and trembling. LOL. I'm in no hurry.

“THE PALE CAST OF THOUGHT”

July 6, 2019

[It's more ramble folks, with for me (maybe) a little direction. LOL. Still hard to sleep around here, since Michigan allows fireworks day-and-night for days (June 29 – July 5th) around the 4th of July and we have some neighbors that set off huge explosions until the last dog dies. Needless to say, I can't sleep through that.

Couple that with the recent heatwave and we have a recipe for tired. I like to go to bed early and if I'm awakened soon after getting to sleep, all bets are off as to how long it will take to get back to sleep.]

What is dharma? I get lost in the mix of dualistic notions as to what it is. For me, it's just the truth. I believe everyone has to have some “truth” in life, if only as a touchstone for sanity. I like to joke with myself that the “truth” is the future. Why? Because of all things, only it will last until then.

Conscious dualisms, even dharmic ones (whatever they are) are wasted on me more and more of the time.

Conceptuality when it comes to dharma is mostly, at least for me, an oxymoron. Another laugh I have with myself is a line I wrote a lifetime ago, “To fail ignorance by a meter or a foot.” If so, by what measure do I miss out on eternity? It's my sense of humor laughing.

Practicing dharma for so many decades, as I have, the effort involved, although perhaps at first required (or unavoidable because of ignorance) is self-defeating in the long run. All the scaffolding we build from the Preliminary practices has to be deconstructed at some point in the process. Mindfulness is not the same as self-conscious effort.

The pith texts say that we should feel repulsion at Samsara. Half the time, I'm just the opposite. I feel repulsed by dharmic effort that is too deliberate and conscious. “Enough effort already,” is my take on it. Sure, give it a push, but then climb aboard and work it from there.

No doubt, this “poor” attitude comes from all the effort I have made over the years to practice dharma. It’s a little whiplash in response to all that trying. With dharma, after the Preliminaries, trial is error.

I don’t want to have to “think” about it, yet I don’t want to be oblivious to the dharma either. It’s my responsibility, when all is said and done, how I respond. I guess the happy medium has to be me.

Being naturally mindful is not the same as efforts to be mindful. The image that keeps coming to mind is that of a bobsled run (either one person or a team). You push the sled at the start of the run, but then comes the point where you have to jump on the sled, tuck in your arms, legs, and head to ride. For me, dharma practice reminds me of this, in that we make an effort and then remove the effort in order to do the realization practices, which by definition have to be effortless. Now you see it, now you don’t.

I’m sure that I’m going through a reaction to all my own effort over the years. Obviously, I tried too hard, not knowing what degree of effort was needed in order to have no-effort – a delicate balance. Thus, my comment about being repulsed by dharma that requires effort. Been there, done that. LOL.

And I’m not impressed how some dharma is often taught. It’s so dry and, forgive me, artificial. Mostly, it’s a bridge too far that never will be crossed. You can’t get there from here is my gut feeling. And so, I’m disturbed to see it coming down that way. I suppose I should take refuge in the thought of different strokes for different folks, and that no effort, even in dharma, is ever wasted.

That’s an easy thought to have, but do I believe it? Not sure I do. When I think of how I personally have learned (what dharma I have learned), I cringe at how very personal it has been in order for me to realize anything. And the Buddhists are so prolific when it comes to writing and literature, orders of magnitude in quantity of lists and written texts to any other “religion.”

Sure, we can rattle off the Four Noble Truths (and list after list), but that does not guarantee that we understand, much less realize, those truths.

I know. We must conceptually understand the dharma before we can experience, much less realize it. Yet, it hurts to see conceptualization pass for experience. And, as for realization, that may be lifetimes away. In all this, I'm describing what hurts "me, myself, and I," but my personal hurt is not helpful to anyone else except as to what not to do. It's just more waste of time.

Before I began to grasp a bit of the dharma, I learned the most from William Shakespeare, especially in his Sonnets. Of all classic western writers, IMO, only Shakespeare comes close to writing pure dharma, and even at that, its clothed in attachment. An example is Shakespeare's "Sonnet 129."

"The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action."

You could do worse than to read the entire sonnet. We each must learn from somewhere or someone. Books are a safe way to learn, but it's like panning for gold and the risk of conceptual contamination is very real. The whole world of dharma books is at hand, yet they are like the shore of a great lake and not to be confused with the water in the lake. That's duality in a nutshell.

All these books, texts, preliminary practices, and on and on exist to CLEARLY tell us to take the plunge into the non-dual realization practices. Or, as "The Bard" sang "Don't think twice, it's alright." If all this conceptuality does not lead to realization, it's a sheer waste of time.

We used to raise dogs, quite by accident. LOL. When a puppy is born, it comes out in a little sac. In humans, this would be called a caul-birth. The mother has to tear open that sack for the puppy to breathe. The veil of thought (like that placental membrane on a birthing puppy) has to be removed before we can actually breathe the dharma. How is that done? Many ways, but not very often by more reading on our part. Conceptuality is cloying beyond the words it is cloaked in. As Shakespeare put it: "The pale cast of thought."

INSCAPE: INSPIRATION

July 7, 2019

Gerard Manley Hopkins, my favorite western poet, came up with a concept that deeply struck me as true. He even coined his own word to describe it, "Inscape." Inscap was to Hopkins an insight into the eternal or the beautiful, literally a sign and signal as to the way-in to the beautiful.

After all, what do I look for in life? What is it that inspires me that's different and stands out from the rush and hum of day-to-day existence? What is this thing we call inspiration that keeps me going? And how does it appear or occur? I feel Hopkins' "Inscap" comes very close to defining this quality of insight for me, that bit of quicksilver of the moment that marks the shift in levels such that I can feel myself slip these clock-ticking seconds and slide beyond the grip of time to where it is timeless, if only for a moment.

Sometimes I know or become aware when this is happening because there is a catch in my throat that leaves me unable to speak, if only briefly. I find myself struggling for words and this announces or is my clue that I am moving beyond language and somehow am liberated from time once again. Hopkins calls it "inscape," the way inward or beyond time to eternity and the timeless.

You tell me in your own words: what is "beauty" if not freedom from the demands of the moment to go inward or to fly skyward. The Tibetans use the image of birds describing patterns that dissolve in the sky as the fly, or like drawing circles in water with our finger. They are nothing at all, but yet they are there.

I like to see and feel beauty anytime that I can. And I look forward to my walks out into the fields, woods, or even our local cemetery. These little trips offer me a chance to get my head together, to relax from the day-to-day grind of life and generally to find a place of rest in space. This is not to say that just going outside and walking in nature means that I am instantly relaxed. That quite often takes some time.

It is the same when it comes to my taking photos. In the first ten minutes of a morning walk or a photo shoot, I often don't see all that much to photograph. There is a transformation that takes time, time for me to slow down, to open up, and "See" again, to let the natural beauty already all around me in or me into it. I have to somehow give in, fall inward. I have to relax in the moment.

It could be that I am still filled with all the workaday-world thoughts, the things I have to do, problems, and what-have-you. It takes time for my mind to relax and let go of its constant chatter. Certainly, this endless worry and thinking affects my photography, not to mention my life. LOL.

And here is where the word 'inscape' comes in. As I get out there and wander through the fields or in my little studio, I very gradually start to slow down and begin to see things that are beautiful, scenes that I might actually WANT to photograph. Slowly, my view of the natural world around me starts to open up again and I begin to view things differently. As mentioned, I begin to 'See'.

This takes time and usually does not happen all at once. It could be this little pattern of leaves over here or the way the light comes through the forest canopy up there and grabs me just a little bit; and the chatter of my mind begins to pause and slows. I ever so slowly turn away from everything that distracts me and find my way inward once again. I'm back.

As I continue to walk along, some little thing or scene appears beautiful to me; I am touched by it, however lightly at first. In this way, I gradually get distracted from my daily distractions and begin to come to rest and center. And, like a flower, I open up.

These little moments are 'inscapes', ways out of my mundane world of distractions and into the beauty of nature or, more accurately, back into the natural state of my own mind or being. As I begin to take my time, I am actually able to see the beauty in things once again. And what I am seeing suddenly seems precious and worth photographing. Like most of us, I photograph what catches my interest, what I find beautiful or worthy in the world around me. I place myself in context.

These inscapes are signals that catch my attention; they flag me down on my busy way forward to nowhere-in-particular. These moments and signs are how I stop going nowhere and manage to almost miraculously arrive somewhere once again, perhaps only into my own peace of mind. This is one of the functions of the beautiful, to catch us in the turmoil of life, flag us down, and induce us to pull over and take a moment of rest, a time out. Without the “beautiful,” where would life be? Moreover, who would we be?

These moments of inscape are different on different days, and probably different for different people. They represent the clues or signs that manage to catch our attention and show us once again the way into the beauty of the natural world, into the beauty of our own natural mind. Another way of saying this might be: what is beauty actually? What happens when we see something beautiful?

Beauty is not simply somewhere out there in nature waiting to be found, but always here within us, locked within us, we who are seeing this nature, we who are capable of seeing the beautiful. Beauty breaks down the rush of the everyday world and opens our heart a wee bit, making us vulnerable again, open to experience and input. It’s like a flower opening.

Through inscapes we go inside and experience the inner beauty of things, which is none other than our own inner beauty. That is what beauty is for, to be touched on, seen, so that we find once again the beauty within our own hearts that we may have lost (or forgotten) through the distractions of our daily life. We look outside in nature to see in here, to see into our own heart once again. Beauty is the thread of life.

MAKING SENSE

July 7, 2019

I'd like to share with those interested a dharma principle that I have found to be indispensable to grasp. Try it on and let me know how it sits with you.

And I will be redundant. Not only will conceptuality not get you there; you can't USE conceptuality to get there. It works against us. For the conceptually minded, it would be like trying to run a marathon with no arms or legs.

This does not mean that we cannot have dualistic thoughts, but only that we cannot become attached or fixated on such thoughts to the exclusion of being one with them. Let me stretch this out.

What I am writing here are just words, but what they point to (and at) is more than that. This is the nature of language; it is all references or pointers. There is no "there" there or anywhere else in words for that matter.

As I keep intoning, words **DEPEND** on their meaning, on the sense they make. All language has to make sense (be sensed by us) or it is: nonsense. And all sense and "sensing" is an experience we each must have. We must "sense" it. In other words, all language is a simple reference (or pointer) that is pointing at a sense experience we must have to experience it, much less realize it's meaning. It is sensual.

And this concept is key: As the dharma teachings point out, all of the senses (eyes, ears, nose, taste, and touch) are direct experiences without any middlemen or commentary (dualism) until after these sense are received and experienced. The dharma teachings very clearly state that our five senses are hard-wired; they are absolutely pure and direct communications. The five senses are **NOT** dualistic. Therefore, as explained, all words and all language are but pointers, references not to themselves but referrals to the senses. They refer us to the world of sensual experience. Words **HAVE** to make sense or else they are, as mentioned, pure nonsense.

And so, all language is nothing in and of itself; it cannot refer to itself except recursively. With words, we can point to a pointer that points to a pointer, etc. However, ultimately a pointer (a word) has to point to an experience in order for it to make sense. It's all about sense, folks, the sensual! All words depend on the sense they make and sense, as mentioned, is a DIRECT and pure non-dualistic experience on our part. Realization is non-dualistic, so our senses have some potential to clue us in, IMO.

Understanding the above teaching is crucial to realizing the more advanced dharma practices. It is only AFTER we have directly sensed the input of the five senses that dualism and conceptualization arise in us. This fact is a great good fortune. We see, hear, feel, smell, and taste purely and directly. We see beauty. We hear music. We feel the warm breeze. We smell flowers. We taste ambrosia.

We make sense.

I believe that if we can grasp the above concept and deeply work with this principle of the direct senses and sensing, it can help to bring about actual transformation and realization.

That's my two-cents.

CONCEPTUALLY BLIND

July 8, 2019

Yesterday's blog on "Making Sense" did not bring much discussion. Either I was NOT able to make sense in what I wrote, LOL, or my point was not interesting. Here is another view of all that:

"Conceptually Blind," in my speak, means that "conceptuality" itself is a form of blindness. We are blinded by concepts and conceptual (dualistic) thinking without realizing it. In other words, we don't know what we are talking about, but we think we do. Our thoughts are not grounded in experience.

This, as opposed to the what the dharma teachers call "non-dualistic," which is sometimes called "absolute truth," although that is not my favorite term for it. In the non-dual dharma practices, we are beyond concepts, beyond what is called "relative truth" and the conceptual mind. In non-duality, our concepts are grounded in experience and most of all in realization of that experience.

This habitual conceptualization contributes to the slow onset of realization of the dharma. To avoid this, it's a bit like a puzzle or riddle. How to achieve realization without just thinking it, as in "conceptualizing." We can "think" realization in a second, yet spend lifetimes trying to realize the concept we just thought. If our habit is dualistic-conceptualization, and all we do is noodle on something conceptually, nothing much will happen dharmic-ally. We have to somehow get beyond conceptualizing and ground our concepts in physical experience and, moreover, then realize the nature of that experience. That is how I read the dharma.

"Conceptually-blind" means that we are chaperoned by our own self-monitoring. i.e. of two minds. This is contrasted with non-dualism, in which we are single-minded and go it alone, without second thoughts. With dualism, we are either inside looking out or outside looking in. With non-dualism, we inside looking out without any outside looking in.

There is a limit to words, after which without running to ground they short-circuit themselves. Language can but grind

out a limited intellectual meaning that essentially is circular. Language is all pointers, all hat and no cowboy, as they say. There not only is no end to words, but no beginning or middle either. In “other words,” with language, what we basically get is a reference, which if we ignore becomes a tautology, something you can’t argue about. It is like a stuck record, repeating itself.

We are all familiar with the emptiness of conceptuality without the life-realization needed to back it up. Pundits are everywhere. An authentic dharma teacher, like a lightning rod, is grounded to the earth through realization of the experience of what they understand.

The hollowness of mere conceptuality is not even worth punishing in ourselves. There is no point in banishing dualism; rather, we learn to just ignore it. It’s not central or important.

Let our dualisms rattle on and be our rosary or prayer-wheel, with the dualism itself as a mantra. Harmless and meaningless, dualism is not worth the effort to do away with it and makes a good drone instrument as background, as a means to achieve realization -- a mala or worry beads.

At the heart of dualism is non-dualism. Settle on that so that dualism is just an aura and not the main event. If we are not fixated on it, dualism is harmless, and mundane relative truth is a necessary part of life. It’s simply a Catch-22 we get caught up in that goes around and around and goes nowhere, a hiccup.

Conceptual dualisms are only a problem if they point to themselves rather than to the sphere of action to which they belong.

THE PAUSE THAT REFRESHES

July 10, 2019

[I am on babysitting duty with our 5-year-old granddaughter Iris, so time is tight. I'm on a break and would like to point out something about cycles and the pauses that occur in them, but it takes a little prep, so bear with me.]

We all have to breathe out and breath in; and there is a little pause or gap between breathing out and breathing back in as well as the reverse. Those pauses in any cycle are usually relative short yet, at least in my experience, they can be fraught with difficulty and therefore with value in their uncertainty.

My first real breath training in meditation came from the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who in February of 1974 took me into a room, sat me down, and spent an hour or so teaching me Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation. He never mentioned the word "meditation" or even said what it was he was doing with me. He just did it. I will spare you the whole story, but the part I would like to relate here is this:

One thing that Trungpa Rinpoche did was have me breath in and breath out. There I was, sitting on a straight-backed wooden chair, my feet flat on the floor, trying to explicitly breathe while Rinpoche directed me. Needless to say, I was nervous. And, as mentioned, I did not know exactly what was going on. LOL.

In the process, Trungpa Rinpoche did not like the way I was exhaling, and he told me so. "Let the breath go out, Michael," and I would self-consciously try my best to do just that. "Let it go out," he repeated. "Let it go all the way out. Don't worry. It will come back!"

And, as Trungpa Rinpoche said that last part, about the breath coming back, something very unusual happened. All of my life-long fear of death and dying came to mind and in that instant was just flushed away. It was powerful. My breath did return, but my fear of death never came back, at least to the degree that it was there before. It is my belief and experience that Trungpa Rinpoche was a siddha – a great being.

And so, this idea of breathing (and how to breathe), including the pauses at the end of inhalation and at the end of exhalation were taught to me. The pause at the end of inhalation was mentioned, but the one at the end of exhalation was not, other than I was to just let go deeply and (through that pause) the breath would come back on its own. Anyway, all that pertained to the cycle of our breath and breathing.

In this blog I am not talking about simply breathing to stay alive or even when meditating, but rather of the larger cycles (or spirals) of life that we entertain. As an astrologer for well over fifty years, I have studied in depth the larger cycles that we can be in synch (or not) with in life. I have worked with the "Foundation for the study of Cycles" as well as programmed a large computer program called "Time Cycles," which no one was interested (other than myself) or bought. LOL.

The larger cycles in life, whether timed or intermittent, follow the same form. There is a taking in, a pause, a letting out, and another pause. I can even see this cyclic form in writing my daily Facebook blog. I am inspired, write like hell for a time, and gradually run out of inspiration. I have expired and find myself in that pause of waiting for inspiration to come back. I have hated that, but am getting over it.

Cycles too have their seasons, their times of inhalation or taking in and exhalation or letting go. These can take hours, days, months, and years. And, as mentioned, I am focusing here on those little pauses at the end of each half of the cycle. And I seem to routinely run my cycles into the ground until the last dog dies.

It could well just be me, but when I have exhausted breathing out and before I can respond to breathing back in again, that little hiatus or pause is not always refreshing, at least not before I'm aware of it. Or, rather, in truth it IS refreshing because it plunges me into the void every time, which is ultimately good for me, like it or not at the time. LOL.

There is a bit of no-mans-land in that pause that we must cross between in and out (and also between out and in), a time where things pause and gradually come to a stationary halt; and, to me, it often seems that inspiration will never start

up again. And then, “mirabile dictum” it does and all is well with the world.

Even as a writer of blogs, I work hard on my writing, but it too comes in spurts or cycles. When I have exhausted an exhale and written all that I can, that dreaded pause takes place and I am without a clue as what to write about. It seems as if I have run out of gas and all my inspiration has dried up forever. As the old Coca-Cola ad said, it is “the pause that refreshes,” only, at first, it does not seem that way.

Those seemingly interminable pauses, waiting for the tide of inspiration to come back in again, are what I am pointing at here. And the point of all these many words is to tell myself that these times of no inspiration are just normal parts of any cycle and pissing and moaning about them on my part will never help. In fact, these times of inspiration-scarcity are excellent times to practice the dharma. That tide of inspiration has always returned.

Here is a song I listen to in those times written by my very talented daughter, May Erlewine. It is called “Rise Up Singing.” Check it out

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BldOMLsLFeg>

IT'S ALL ABOUT BEING AWARE OF AWARENESS

July 11, 2019

Everything turns on our intrinsic Awareness, the very same awareness that allows you to read this sentence. This Awareness lights up our life. And the reason I mention it so often in these blogs is that is how indispensable this Awareness is. Yet, for the most part, we are unaware of it and pay it no mind, even though our awareness of this Awareness is key for dharma practice.

At the same time, here we are wanting to progress with our dharma training, so there is a disconnect in there somewhere. And this because this same Awareness is the heart and soul of all advanced meditation, what are called the realization practices, in particular Insight Meditation, the special form of Vipassana used in Mahamudra Meditation as practiced by the Karma Kagyu Lineage.

This native vivid Awareness that we have is the solvent for everything dualistic, what is called “relative truth,” our ingrained habit of “me, myself, and I” as a subject and “you and everything out there” as an object. Many of the greatest siddhas and Mahasiddhas have emphasized that rather than prolonged meditation sessions, i.e. many short sessions of resting in this Awareness that we each have, which itself is just perfect. As my root teacher points out, the time that it takes for a sip of tea amounts to a session of meditation. It can be that short and repeated many times.

We simply rest in or on top of the intrinsic Awareness that we each have right now in this moment. And we don't have to meditate on anything at all. Just relax and rest the mind on (and in) this same Awareness that lights up life. It's that easy or difficult.

It can be difficult because few of us are even aware of our intrinsic Awareness as it is. And if we are aware of it, like the Sun, we can't stand to look at it directly, much less rest in it. This Awareness is the elephant in the room that is never

noticed, much less looked directly at or into. So, there you have the problem.

This magic treasure, our innate Awareness, is the universal solvent, what we can learn to use to dip into in order to solve most anything. This Awareness is the solvent and solution that, when judiciously mixed with conceptuality, protects the meditator from distraction while shining vivid awareness on whatever concept, idea, or situation is mixed with it.

I'm a great lover of what are called the "pith" dharma instructions, yet I realize that they are so compact that each word counts and almost has to be understood as an essay in itself. And so, to better drive this home, I ask your permission to go off the reservation a bit, using more flowery words to express what cannot be expressed in words, or at least try to. This is, IMO, most easily seen in the practice of Insight Meditation -- Vipassana.

Sometimes I think that this intrinsic Awareness we each have is the "spirit ink" in the pen of inspiration that allows me to write blogs such as this one. I mix my relative world (and its dualistic truth) with non-dualistic or the "absolute" truth of this non-dual Awareness through Insight Meditation. I do this as much as I can all the time.

This Awareness is the "quicksilver" that dissolves or collapses conceptuality until there are no second thoughts, but only certainty, limited of course by my own personal filter of attachments (or lack thereof).

This Awareness, IMO, is pure magic. It's not enough to say that this Awareness sheds light on whatever it shines on; of course, it does. However, it is way more than just that. Because it is singular and nondual, everything it touches is free of duality and distraction, limited (as mentioned) only by our own obscurations. We can say that (and many do) this stillness or "stay-there-ness" is the result of Shamata or Tranquility Meditation, but that does not do it justice either.

Shamata and Vipassana, although distinct are not actually two different things. Basically, they are connate, either end of the same stick, so to speak. They work together insolubly (each distinct) to enable Mahamudra Meditation. Traditionally, Shamata is taught before Vipassana and the reason given is

that Shamata is necessary to provide a stable base for launching Vipassana.

However, like so many things, this is only generally true. However, what little I know about it, Shamata did not snap into place fully before Vipassana came on the scene. In my own experience, they arose in their beauty at the same time, not in sequence as one before the other. In other words, they each enable the other is my take on the topic. That being said, basic Mindfulness and mental stability is required, which usually defaults to Shamata being taught and practiced before attempting Vipassana (Insight Meditation). Yet, don't get hung up on that. Slavishness is always just that.

We could cut to the quick and just say that Shamata holds us steady so that Vipassana can zap us. That would be true, just a little on the crude side. The united effect of Shamata and Vipassana of the Kagyu Mahamudra style is totally more subtle and elegant than that. IMO, the combination is the most perfect or miraculous means for realization of the dharma that I can imagine. How to put this.

Once the Realization Practices (Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, etc.) are started, there is no end of them until enlightenment itself is attained. In fact, these practices are all about extending and expanding whatever realization is attained at what is called "Recognition," the recognition on the part of the student to the pointing-out-instructions as to the true Nature of the Mind by an authentic teacher.

In Mahamudra practice, this unique combination of Shamata and Insight Meditation work together (are connate) to provide an engine (reciprocally) for continuous realization. Once ignited via "Recognition" as to the true nature of the mind, realization runs its course toward enlightenment provided that it is continually expanded and extended. It may take many lifetimes.

In summary, becoming aware of our own Awareness is the place to start, IMO. You have all the tools you need (i.e. your Awareness) with you all the time. The teachings tell us that Awareness is innate and we not only learn to look right at it,

but more important we learn to rest in and on top of this Awareness.

If you look right now at your Awareness that is looking at this page, you will be looking at "Looking At," so to speak. The most common result is a kind of short-circuit effect, like pushing two magnets together of opposite polarity. We look, but get push-back and therefore still cannot see. The idea is not so much to look-to-see, as it is to relax and rest in and on that Awareness.

Instant success at this is not common. It is very much like trying to look directly at the Sun. Looking directly at our innate Awareness is also blinding and to be undertaken only gradually. At this point for most of us, the light of the mind is so bright that we are blinded by the starkness of the light and have always been up to now. I am using the analogy of the Sun, but substitute for the blinding by light of the sun, rather the blinding by the stark reality of the loss of our attachments and total lack of entertainment. That is what is blinding by looking directly at our innate Awareness. We are blinded by the purity of non-elaboration. We don't see anything! It is very uncomfortable and not at all entertaining in the way we are habituate

MEETING OUR DHARMA TEACHER: THE STORY

July 12, 2019

[Heading into a long series of very hot days coming up by Monday. Still putting the house back together after putting in new floors in three rooms and now refinishing four others. There goes the summer. LOL.]

The Nature of the Mind

“Thoughts,
Fingerprints of the mind,
Are all different,
But identical,
In nature.”

Above, a little poem from years ago, pointing out that our words and thoughts are each unique and incalculable in number. However, their life-saving grace is that they all share the exact same nature. In other words, if we can recognize the nature of any one thought, we automatically know the nature of ALL thoughts. While their content may vary, the nature of every thought is the same. We learn to look at a thought's nature, not its content. This is somewhat of a big deal in dharma practice.

It's like that old saying, “That first step is a doozy.”; identifying the nature of a thought for the first time is not a walk in the park but it marks a key step in our dharma path. In dharma-practice terms, this is synonymous with achieving Insight Meditation through what is called “Recognition,” meaning recognizing the true nature of our mind.

Yet, it is also saying that once the nature of any one thought is identified, we have cleared a major hurdle in dharma practice. And because this step of Recognition is not easy for most of us, we need the assistance of an authentic dharma teacher to clear that first hurdle.

It's up to us to reach out. Here is the story of how Margaret and I met our dharma teacher.

MEETING KHENPO KARTHAR RINPOCHE

Meeting Rinpoche was a life-changer for me. My wife and I have been with Rinpoche going on 40 years and he has never changed in how he treats everyone, always with kindness.

How fortunate to have come across someone like Khenpo Rinpoche in the sea of life in which I found myself, although it was anything but an accident. In fact, believe it or not, Rinpoche first came to us in a dream. Here is the story:

It was in the fall of 1983 when I received a phone call from my old friend James Coats of Ann Arbor. We were living where we are now, in Big Rapids, Michigan, some three hours north. He just called to say that I might want to come to Ann Arbor and see this Tibetan rinpoche (we used to go “guru” hopping together). However, at the time I was a businessman, and busy at that. I thanked him, of course, for the invitation, but pointed out that this was a work-day and that I no longer was meeting every new teacher that came to Ann Arbor. I wished him well and went about my work.

It was a couple of days later that I had the dream, very early in the morning, just before dawn. I dreamed I was driving to Ann Arbor to meet this radiant golden being, some kind of monk or lama... but resplendent, and then I woke up. I sat bolt upright in bed and tried to reach in my mind to recapture the dream, but too late. And as the dream vaporized, I suddenly felt a great sadness come over me, sadness that my life had become so work-oriented that magical moments or events of wonder no longer really interrupted my routine. All I could see was my life stretching on to a dead end.

The dream was better than life and I regretted that this was the case. I woke up my wife Margaret, who, amazingly enough, had a similar dream. We looked at one another and I decided that there was no way I was going to work today. Instead, we would drive to Ann Arbor and meet this “golden” being from our dreams that my friend told me was visiting Ann Arbor. By this time, it must have been around 7 AM. I dialed my friend James in Ann Arbor, although I knew he was a late sleeper usually. I said we were coming to meet the Rinpoche. His answer was that we were too late. Rinpoche was leaving Ann Arbor for Columbus, Ohio at around 10 AM, and it is a three-hour drive to Ann Arbor.

My answer to that was that we were coming anyway. I just could stand the thought of my normal business life after the dream. The Rinpoche would either still be there or he would have gone. Margaret and I grabbed our kids and, literally, with toothbrushes in hand we jumped into the car and headed out. We brushed our teeth as we drove, and we drove as fast as we dared. When we finally got to Ann Arbor, James was down at the end of the long driveway, waiting to flag us in.

By luck, it turned out that the Rinpoche was still there. As we drove up the long driveway I spotted a young Tibetan man with long hair out in the yard. My heart fell, because this was not the golden man in my dreams! I soon found out that this was Rinpoche's translator, Ngodup Burkhar, who became a dear friend of our family. So, there we were, Margaret, I, and the kids waiting for Rinpoche in the living room. And then he walked in.

And here, indeed, was the radiant being from my dreams, and in living person. We connected at once and, although the visit was brief, when Rinpoche left on his road trip, Margaret and I were already transported into a transcendent state. And we went around in that state for days afterward, being kinder to others than perhaps we had ever been. Of course, although we squandered that first state, we took this as a good sign.

And from that day onward, we were students of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Years later, he became my Root Guru, and all that. My kids grew up around and within his influence, his mandala. Of course, to me, he has been the perfect teacher.

We are so grateful for Rinpoche's presence in our lives.

SOME TOUGH LOVE

July 12, 2019

We can relax and rest in the innate Awareness of our mind, or at least try to. Good luck with that! We glorify this pure Awareness yet have managed to ignore it all (or most) of our lives. LOL. Why is that?

In my experience, that is because this pure Awareness is devoid of attachments, fixations, and the mindless entertainment that we crave. And where would we be without those?

What I experienced in my recent stroke was Awareness stripped of all its entertainment value and I could not stand it. I had to turn away and run for cover; any port in that storm of clarity. LOL. I found out that my bark is bigger than my bite when it came to realizing this innate Awareness in real-time.

However, at the time of my stroke, there was nowhere to run. It was all stark desert and deserted as far as I could see. I was forced to tough it out in vivid nakedness. And, did it ever hurt! The hurt was my being unable to stand being the naked sore-thumb that I found I was when stranded in that pure vivid Awareness without entertainment. LOL.

So, this innate Awareness, at least according to me, is not something we take “neat,” without a healthy mix of distraction and entertainment. Entertainment is the worry-beads that keep us tuned out and into the shadows we are so used to. At least, that is what I experienced extensively after my stroke. I was amazed!

When all is said and done, “appearances” indeed are empty, as the dharma texts say, nothing more than the emptiness itself appearing. We can get lost in the phantasmagoria of our fixations (and do), but a sudden shock (like a stroke) can vaporize all that distraction in an instant, leaving us standing naked and blinded by the light of our own native Awareness. Stripped of our entertainment, just try and find the shade of even a shadow then. It’s not there, not anywhere.

And so, I take a step back from all the elaboration in the written dharma texts about Awareness and our becoming aware of Awareness. Yes, of course, but there is a reason those of us in Samsara have not realized Awareness. It's not like it's not right in front of us; rather, it's that we ignore this innate Awareness and turn away from it out into the relief of the distracting shadows of life's attachments and fixations. Like the ostrich, we stick our head in the sands of entertainment, seeking relief from the vividness of Awareness.

My point, if only to myself, is that it's not as simple as that we have not yet seen the light. LOL. Sure, we have not seen it, because we can't stand to look, not because it is alluring to us in its gentleness and desirability. This vivid Awareness scares the Bejesus out of us and we bow our heads, cover our eyes, and just will not look. We can't stand the light.

My request here is to: please mix the above thoughts into your search for Awareness. Awareness is not as hard to find as people seem to believe, because it is totally in our face all the time. We use it as a tool, our personal searchlight! It is we who cannot look at it. Anyway, that's my two cents based on direct experience.

If dharma is realizing Awareness, becoming aware of our innate Awareness, that is a desert that must be crossed and not some pie-in-the-sky out there we can't wait to get to. Like a leggy plant placed in the sun, we must harden off before we can endure the vivid Awareness that illuminates us. And looking directly at the true nature of the mind, IMO, is some tough love.

We must learn to endure it. And this is perhaps why, after the opening supplication, the Kagyu Lineage prayer starts off by saying that "detachment" from our fixations and attachment is the "foot of meditation." It comes before anything else.

LONLINESS AND DHARMA

July 13, 2019

Let's talk about loneliness. I'm not an expert on loneliness, except perhaps that I feel lonely from time to time. I'm confessing that I am ashamed of the loneliness I occasionally feel, but feel it I sometimes do, so let's discuss if you are open to it. And there are different kinds of lonely. It can be important to know what kind of lonely you are.

I have never much liked being the outrider, walking point. I much prefer being loved, appreciated, and embraced. I can't believe I am the Lone Ranger in all this either. It was communicated to me, over the years, that this part of me, this feeling too much by myself or "lonely", is a weakness. I get it, but as they say, that knowledge and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus.

And I have put in my time examining words like "Alone" and reading the word as "All One," and all that. Yes, I must stand on my own two feet. I have done my best to do that, but for some reason I prefer to stand alone with a bunch of us, not always as a singleton.

Where did this sense of "aloneness: come from? Perhaps it came from living out in the country as a grade schooler, the only house in walking distance between two very large farms. There was no one near to play with. Or was it because I was the oldest in a family of five boys and had no one to look up to. My four younger brothers were great to do stuff with, but when push came to shove, I could not depend on them to advise me. They were looking up to me. I was on own, so to speak.

I have also learned that the past in general is not worth digging in for answers. It is a slippery slope and a shifting target that is pretty-much just our own projection. It is in the present moment where everything happens, but I digress. I am talking here about loneliness and me.

I am one of those people who likes (or has liked) to read journals and diaries. Of course, I appreciate the work of someone like Franz Kafka or M.C. Escher, but I always end

up digging through their journals for more understanding of them. I have a shelf a couple of feet wide with just the journals of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, plus a lot more shelves for those of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Amos Bronson Alcott. In fact, I fantasize that I am in the lineage of the American Transcendentalists. LOL.

I would even venture to say that I am more interested in the inner lives of many of these authors than I am in their main work itself. At heart, I am what is called a “phenomenologist,” someone who bases their philosophy on what they experience directly. In dharma terms, I believe I would be placed in with those of the Yogachara tradition.

Let’s take M.C. Escher as an example. In his early journal writings, Escher goes on and on about how lonely it is to be the genius he was. This amounts to a drone instrument throughout what he writes. And then, quite late in his writings, he says something to the effect that, and I paraphrase here, although his life is so lonely, he finds that same loneliness “so refreshing.” That cracks me up.

Or, in the diaries of Franz Kafka, the single line “Each sentence I write, it already has perfection.” Well, that took a decade or two for me to totally unpack it, until I understood that he was saying that instead of working to become a good writer, instead Kafka worked to perfect his mind so that each sentence he wrote already had perfection, because he had perfection. That was life lesson learned and leads right into the dharma.

And I am more than a little aware that the great Greek philosopher Parmenides stated that “Being Alone Is.” Period, end-of-story. Whatever we sentient beings are, we have always (many lifetimes) been alone in our life and death to some significant degree. We each die alone and move onward towing the great barge of Alayavijnana behind us from life to life.

I reflect that while we each are alone; we can be alone together. That’s the best I can come up with. Where did this sense of “aleness” come from? I tend to blame it on European literature and in particular the German Bildungsroman, and books like Goethe’s “The Sorrows of

Young Werther,” Gottfried Keller’s “Der Grüne Heinrich,” Henri Alain-Fournier’s “The Wanderer,” or our own J.D. Salinger’s “Catcher in the Rye.”

I believe I grew up with the German concept of Weltschmerz (world sorrow) firmly implanted in my chest. My tribe seems to be among the romantics, those who yearn for what is not yet present. LOL.

So, how does all my “Weltschmerz” mix with the Dharma? For sure, the dharma is the antidote for yearning and dreaming beyond the present. As the Zen Buddhist point out so wholeheartedly, being here now is where it is at. Therefore, is it just the “romantic” in me that feels lonely and yearns for what I don’t have?

I’m not sure there is a reasonable solution for a penchant to feel “lonely, even in a crowd” that I grew up with. Perhaps it just has to dry up and blow away. And folks like me have to suffer that sooner or later. LOL.

I find that those that I feel I can learn from, the tribe of my near-elders, don’t connect with me. They are uninterested. Probably have been there, done that, and not interested in helping me learn. And this goes for dharma folks, as well. For some reason, there is “no room in the inn” for my kind, whatever kind that is. I thank goodness for Rinpoche, the lama I have worked with for over 36 years. His presence galvanizes me and somehow burns off the dross of whatever loneliness I feel.

We all should know that the Dharma is beyond loneliness, by definition. It’s the only antidote that I have found to cope with any remaining melancholy from my youth. And when I say this, I mean my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and few others. I have always been a black-sheep or maverick, perhaps by my own choice. I don’t know because I don’t know.

I have never thought of myself as a “dharma teacher” or have even wanted to be. Too dangerous. If anything, I am a dharma-sharer, someone who wants to share dharma. I love to discuss dharma and I feel driven to share dharma with anyone interested, but I don’t find that, of the very many lamas I know or have met (and that is a bunch), they will

discuss much of anything I am interested in. Perhaps what I want to know more about is secret or they have vowed not to discuss it, but where is someone like myself who is learning dharma to go, if not to students more experienced than me?

Yet, in my trips to Tibet, the monks there seem very much enthused to discuss and debate with one another whatever they are practicing. But over here in the west, talking about dharma practice is treated like a disease we don't want to get.

I have had to figure almost everything out by myself, because no one instructed me or was willing to answer my questions. Or, is that just the way dharma learning is? I know that (ultimately) we each must learn for ourselves, and I do. Yet, I also believe that those who have more experience might take more time to work with those of us who are hungry to learn. After all, what are they getting enlightened for if not to help folks like us?

What little experience and realization I might have, I do my very best to share with others in places like here. I don't want anyone who wants to learn dharma to feel I am shutting them out for any reason other than perhaps they are not ready to assimilate what I write about. In which case, don't read my blogs. LOL.

And so, am I lonely?" Not really or not much. I am very happy puttering around by myself most of the time. I don't do particularly well in crowds and parties. Too much input. I do best one-to-one. If I think about it, what loneliness I feel has to do with not understanding why those who have taken the dharma path as I am trying to do are not more interested in those of us who are still less experienced, "younger" in the dharma than they are. That does makes me lonely.

There is little to zero interest as far as I can see of them in me or those like me. The great rinpoches do not do that. Good grief! My main dharma teacher treats everyone the same, carefully answering the rude college student as much as he answers me, or close. How amazing is that?

I'm not a dharma scholar and not the best practitioner. My only quality is that I have the most profound dharma teacher in the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Aside for that, I have a very strong desire to share dharma with other folks so they do

not have to needlessly struggle as I did to learn. That and Bodhicitta is very, very important to me.

So, the bottom line for me as to loneliness boils down to this and it may not be the best reason. I will tell a story. Back in 1961, I hitchhiked and traveled with a young Bob Dylan. We were in New York City one night at a place called Gerde's Folk City. It was late and we had not yet found anywhere we could sleep, like a floor or whatever. We were hanging back in the club listening to the blues guitarist and vocalist Kanny Kalb, who later became one of the original members of the Blues Project.

Danny Kalb at that moment what was happening and getting all the attention that night. Bob Dylan was taking this all in. You could perhaps easily think that Dylan was jealous of the limelight that Kalb was enjoying, but you would miss the fine-print. Dylan was not (IMO) jealous, but rather already aware at some level that he was "Bob Dylan." He wanted to, as I like to say, "be in that number, when the saints come marchin' in." He knew he had a tribe, but perhaps just had not found it yet.

I feel the same way about the dharma and this country. I'm not envious or jealous, but at some deep level I believe that I belong to a tribe of Americans practicing dharma as it flows into this country. My loneliness is confined to yearning for the group of folks like me that must be popping up all over pretty soon. I want to be with my dharma friends, if I can find them. I know that those I am looking for are also looking for me. I am lonely for them.

Anyway, that's my story. Glad to hear your take on loneliness.

SITTING MEDITATION: SHAMATA

July 14, 2019

Way back then (the late 1950s), “sitting meditation” is what we called it, and this was before Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism had caught hold. Yes, there was the Nyingma teacher, Tarthang Tulku, but he was almost like an anomaly, the raindrop before the storm. Mostly, this was before Chögyam Trungpa made the scene in America.

In those days, it was pretty much all about Zen Buddhism. We used to stay up late night, perhaps after an Ingmar Bergman movie, smoke cigarettes and drink terrible instant coffee (with powdered creamer) and talk about Buddhism. I was taken by the teakwood floors, Shoji screens, and raked gardens of Zen in contrast to my messy rooms.

Of course, in the 1960s I tried sitting all-day Zazen with Roshi Philip Kapleau, kyosaku (stick) and all. There was this emphasis on long sits. This was followed in the early 1970s by Chögyam Trungpa and really-long sitting sessions, and Weekthuns and Dathuns were recommended. And the worst things of all were the very-hard rectangular meditation cushions from Samadhi Cushions called Gomdens (their trademark). They were filled with a block of too-firm (IMO) foam. Very painful!

Back then, we didn't know any better and only slowly did we find out that the rinpoches, khenpos, and lamas that we knew NEVER sat on the “Gomden.” Instead they sat on softer cushions that shaped themselves to their behinds. Today, I use an old Gomden cover filled loosely with kapok. But I digress.

Anyway, early-on, anyone who was anyone emphasized how long they sat and not much else. It was a peculiar habit that I only found (much too late for my comfort!) in America that students did not talk about their dharma practice. When I went to Tibet and saw thousands of monks, they all talked, discussed, and debated about dharma practice, like: all the time. So, why we Americans were told not to discuss our practice I do not know, but it did not come from Tibet. Sure,

we don't share private instructions from our Root Guru because they pertain to us, but otherwise all of what are called the Preliminary Practices of Vajrayana Buddhism are totally openly discussed in Tibet. LOL.

Which brings me to what this sitting in meditation is all about. One other thing: in Tibet, students are usually NOT introduced to sitting meditation (Shamata) at the start of dharma practice, but rather only after completing the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro), which are a set of four extensive purification practices plus a fifth (non-purification practice) called Guru Yoga.

However, as was explained to me, the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (and perhaps others) decided to start off with sitting practice (Shamata) first and then introduce the Ngondro practices. Why? Because, apparently, Americans would not do the Ngondro. LOL.

I can testify to myself being "horrified" at hearing about the arduous Ngondro practices (100,000 this and 100,000 that) and thought they had to be some throwback from Medieval times. Anyway, my "two cents" is that introducing sitting meditation before the purification practices was not helpful (at least to me) at all. Sitting meditation (Shamata or Tranquility Meditation) is much harder than doing the equivalent of dharma pushups in Ngondro.

When I finally got around (was willing) to do the Ngondro, my guru didn't give me permission to do them, asking me instead to work with some of the Lojong practices, like Tong-Len. And when I finally did do the Ngondro practices (which took a couple years) and interviewed with Rinpoche to tell him I was done and proudly ready to start the more "advanced" practices, Rinpoche asked me if I wanted to know what he would do if he were I. I of course said yes. His answer to me was that he would do another round of Ngondro. Of course, I did just that. LOL. Eventually I did go on to some of the deity practices like Karma Pakshi, Vajrapani, and so on.

All of the above is prologue to pointing at the heart of Shamata Meditation, which is commonly called Tranquility Meditation or simply "Calm Abiding." Of course, back then we were all scrambling to get beyond Shamata to what we

imagined were the more-juicy deity practices and so on. Shamata, to us, was something to pass through and not get hung up on. Another big mistake.

Almost all of the Vajrayana teachings point out that Tranquility Meditation, some stable foundation of resting the mind, is required before we can move on to the realization practices like Vipassana (Insight Meditation). Of course, we all wanted to be done with meditation-101 and get on to the realization practices.

However, the more advanced practices can be like a house-of-cards without a mastery of Shamata. Needless to say, we had no idea what a mastery of Shamata was. We were being told to pick an object like a stick or stone, our own breath, or whatever and learn to rest our mind on it. And what might have seemed like a piece of cake, was anything but. Resting the mind, however you spell it, is an advanced practice (IMO). LOL.

And with that said, I would like to go off the reservation a bit, so to speak, and discuss what I find are some of the difficulties of mastering Shamata Meditation, which is what I like to call it. If this is too non-standard, I apologize, but this has been learned often through bitter experience.

The kind of mindfulness described in tutorials for Shamata meditation often are, IMO, too mechanical. Shamata is not simply minding your breath or an object. You can try that; I did too, but with mixed results. I found that I did not just have to do it as instructed, but I had to do it with "heart." In other words, I had to love to do it. And here comes a sidebar.

One time, when Rinpoche was speaking to a small group of us, he mentioned that those of us who work with computers may have a leg-up on other folks, because the kind of concentration needed for Shamata can be part of working intensely with computers. Those were not his exact words, but rather my take on what he was pointing out.

At the time he said this, I was having a terrible time with Shamata meditation. Try as I might (and I tried, tried, tried) I could not master it. Nada. However, the moment Rinpoche pointed this out (or as soon as I could go off and ponder it), I realized a very simple thing:

I could not learn to concentrate as in Shamata because I already totally knew how to concentrate and was just blindly (and stupidly) following instructions instead of realizing what was required. As a system computer programmer of many decades, I already knew cold how to totally concentrate. I had to, because even one character out of place in computer code can mean the program does not run at all.

You can't salt the salt, and you can't concentrate the concentration. As soon as I realized that I already was expert at that kind of mindfulness, everything changed. And there is one other thing I want to add.

We not only have to be able to totally concentrate, but we have to LOVE to do it. In dharma, this is a huge point to grasp. We have to love the process of concentration, meaning we have to love what we are concentrating on. So, that's a double whammy.

Of course, I could concentrate and I loved what I was concentrating on. But all those years while I was TRYING to learn Shamata sitting on a cushion and following my breath or staring at a stick, I did not love the process or the stick, etc. And the takeaway is:

If you are not progressing fast enough in your Shamata practice, reflect on what in your life you love to do that also requires real concentration. For me, that was the ticket. We can practice this type of concentration on ANYTHING we do more easily than we can stare at a stick or a stone. Dharma has to spread through our whole life in all of what we do. Don't limit it to "Dharma" as instructed from a book. Be more free than that!

Of course, if you are sitting on the cushion and mastering Shamata, no problem. I'm only talking to folks like myself who have had problems doing just that. All that I am really saying here is make sure that your approach to mindfulness is something you are intensely interested in (as in love to do), rather than something you are trying to follow, some more abstract instructions in how to do it. In other words, once more, with heart!

I could go on with other suggestions, but this is already too long. I will try to write another blog where I attempt to explain

why Shamata may not fully cohere (come together) until
Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is aroused.

Enough for now.

SHAMATA AND VIPASSANA: CO-EQUALS

July 15, 2019

I would like to discuss the two most frequent meditation practices, Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation). They are frequently presented as a sequence, with Shamata being learned first; and then after stability in that practice can be maintained, Vipassana is introduced. I often use an analogy to present these two forms of meditation, that of trying to thread a needle. Stable Shamata allows us to steady the hand holding the needle, so that Vipassana can then thread the needle. This sequence is pretty much a standard way of seeing these two.

I can't argue with this approach, but in my own experience, it's a little different from that and not quite so simple. Of course, there are scores of methods for Vipassana in the various forms of Buddhism and they may not even resemble one another. Because of that, it is important to make clear in this blog that the form of Vipassana discussed here is non-standard, meaning as I understand it, this particular form of Vipassana is exclusive (or at least it is termed "very special") to the Kagyu lineage and is part and parcel of Mahamudra Meditation training. I have been told that it occurs nowhere else. That is point number one.

The second point is that in Mahamudra practice of the kind I have been instructed in and practice, Shamata is considered much more important than in most other presentations of Tranquility Meditation, where (as mentioned) Shamata instruction is often given only as a way-stop to Vipassana and not as a complete practice in itself.

However, in Mahamudra training, Shamata and Vipassana are treated equally, except to note that Shamata is seen as a relative (dualistic) practice and Vipassana as an absolute (non-dualistic) practice. However, that difference is not emphasized in Mahamudra training, where Shamata and Vipassana are treated as co-equals and even what we might call "connate," two sides of the same coin. I may be using the term "connate" incorrectly here, but I want to emphasize that with Mahamudra practice, Shamata and

Vipassana each enhance the other almost recursively. Shamata is not the little brother it often is considered.

The takeaway here is that Shamata and Vipassana are very much co-equals in Mahamudra practice and the combination of the two are necessary for Mahamudra Meditation. I'm not a scholar, but simply a practitioner, and so perhaps if someone who has the necessary scholarly background can clarify this, it would be helpful.

On the other hand, from practical experience I do know that these two meditation methods (Shamata and Vipassana) do work with and affect one another. I know this because, as I became familiar with Vipassana, simultaneously my Shamata came into much greater focus. In other words, these two methods arose together in my practice and not simply in sequence. The upshot is that if not "connate," they are something like connate, one effect as seen from two angles or ends of the same phenomenon. Each is indispensable.

Like the analogy of the hand holding the needle, Shamata steadies the hand so that Vipassana can thread the needle. That much is clear to me.

We could go on to describe the experience of these two in Mahamudra Meditation, but that experience is in the realm of realization, which is non-dual and cannot accurately be expressed in words. We can try to define Mahamudra (and its component practices), but such a description is ineffable and (by definition) falls short of the reality.

Vipassana very much depends upon how we use it and first encounter it. I will say something about my own experience in the following blog if all is well.

TOUCHING ON VIPASSANA

July 16, 2019

In the previous blog, I mentioned something about the relation of Shamata and Vipassana to Mahamudra Meditation. We might just as well simply have asked what is Mahamudra? That's how close these methods are to one another. And I hope I made it clear that in Mahamudra training, Vipassana is a very special form of Insight Meditation and not to be confused with the scores of styles of Vipassana scattered throughout Buddhism.

As for me, I have trouble separating Vipassana from Mahamudra in practice. And finally, we should be clear that Vipassana is tailored, like hand-to-glove, to the particular practitioner and his or her filter or persona. One size does not fit all, although the result of Vipassana practice is always non-dual; yet, there are infinite avenues into the non-dual practices. This concept may at first sound confusing.

In describing Vipassana, we can only say that it is indescribable and leave it at that, but of course we don't. LOL. There are an untold number of poems, dohas (songs of realization), Namtars (spiritual biographies), liturgies, and texts extolling Vipassana as practiced in Mahamudra Meditation. It's enough to make you write poetry. LOL.

I could (and often have) gone to great lengths (and in great length) to describe the classic dharma event called "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind, so I really should not repeat all that here, which would fill this entire blog. Or, that Recognition can ONLY be pointed out to us by an authentic guru, someone who has themselves achieved Recognition. And that Recognition is not Enlightenment, but only the first actual realization an aspiring dharma student has, a realization that then marks the path or road to enlightenment to be followed for, perhaps, many lifetimes. Here I would like to contain myself just to saying something about my own experience with Vipassana and Mahamudra, which are all I really know about and have to offer.

First, let me say that my idea of Insight Meditation and the dharma event termed “Recognition” (before having it pointed out to me by my teacher) was little better than no idea at all. It was worse than that. There is no one idea or conceptual framework that encapsulates or properly describes Vipassana. None that I have ever seen. Every authentic dharma text states that Vipassana is ineffable, beyond words. It is non-dual by nature.

For example, all those years when I was looking for awareness and realization somewhere out there in my future, at the end of the dharma rainbow. Yet, that’s not where realization is. Realization, by definition, has to come from within ourselves and not from the outside. And any realization that we have or ever could have has to come through the filter or our Self (or lack thereof) and our particular personality. I don’t feel this point is well understood by many dharma students, i.e. that realization comes from inside us, not from above, beyond, or somewhere out there.

This was strikingly pointed out to me when I first met His Holiness the 17th Karmapa in person at his ancestral home in Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet at some 15,000 feet or so of elevation. In that first moment, when I was in the presence of the young Karmapa, I was not struck by what a powerful presence he was (as I have when meeting many spiritual leaders in the past), but rather I was struck to the core not by the Karmapa’s compassion, but instead by what a deeply compassionate being I was. I had no idea.

His Holiness only indirectly reflected himself by revealing to me through his presence my own essence as one of great compassion. This is Chenresik – Avalokiteshvara. I never would have guessed it. LOL. That’s how realization arises, from within ourselves, in this case enabled by the Karmapa.

I say this because the arousal of Vipassana is like this as well. It comes from within us, totally in our own speak and language, as subtle as we can be subtle. It’s like we are blessing ourselves.

Vipassana is non-dual, which means that there are no second (or third) thoughts, no mental chaperone, and no dualism at all, only the vivid awareness of our own inner Awareness as

delicately mixed with whatever is the means through which Vipassana arises. In my experience and opinion, Vipassana is the key to our yidam, the particular path or means that we must take to realization and eventual enlightenment.

By “means” here, I refer to the avenue, topic, process, and entrance through which Vipassana occurs to us. In my case, it had nothing whatsoever to do with my personal shrine or the cushion I had sat on for decades. It was not about “Buddhism” or anything conceptual whatsoever as I might have imagined or had looked forward to. In other words, Vipassana was perfectly organic and just came out of the blue like a lightning! It was deeply beyond the personal. It was pure dharma, but it was not clothed in any dharma-speak whatsoever. Dharma is more natural than dharma-language. It would be fair to say that all of the myriads of books, texts, songs, and so forth on the dharma are a dim reflection of its reality. As helpful as reading dharma can be, ultimately IMO it is just another obscuration.

And, as mentioned, Vipassana did not occur to me in relation to a text or to any of the thousand books I have on dharma and Buddhism. Nor did it come through a particular dharma practice, mantra, offering, or anything overtly Tibetan or even “dharmic.” It is way more local and personal than that and just miles away from any dharma jargon. Yes, it was the result of many decades of formal dharma practice, but the resulting non-dual realization was as familiar and natural as finding my way back home or, as the Tibetans say, recognizing the face of a friend in a crowd.

MAHAMUDRA: A STORY

July 16, 2019

[This is a long one folks, the story of how I became initiated into Mahamudra meditation. Also, happy Full-Moon Partial-Eclipse today around 5:38 PM EDT.]

I would like to tell you the story of how I discovered and got into Vipassana and Mahamudra meditation. The problem as I see it is there are several chapters to the story which, like pieces of a puzzle, have to fall into place for you to get the right idea as to how it all went.

Some of the earlier chapters and factors would interest serious dharma students, but put the rest of you to sleep, at least until you hear more about the outcome, the raw beauty of Insight Meditation (Vipassana). What to do?

My gut is to tell what to me is the crux of the story first, and then, if there is any interest, fill in the blanks as questions arise. The reason I want to corral all the different parts of the story is not just for coherence, but more importantly because without grasping the various factors deeply, those of you interested in learning this practice could easily get the wrong idea. And I don't want that, for your sake. In other words, there is a long history of practice that culminates in this story and without that, all you may get is a story, when my intention is to provide some clues to how all this can happen as a dharma practice. My experience and story is on the unorthodox side, so bear with me.

ON MY OWN AGAIN

This story begins after I had sold my large businesses and had gone to work for NBC. I had been working for the preceding four years or so as a senior consultant to NBC, an area of theirs specializing in astrology, something I know quite a lot about – 50+ years of experience. I was putting in long hours for them (and for myself), because I was building content for both them and myself, something I am well-known for in my career as an archivist of popular culture, creator of the All-Music Guides (allmusic.com), the All-Movie Guide

(allmovie.com), ClassicPosters.com, and other entertainment sites.

It is not unusual for me to put in 12 or 14 hours, seven days a week. I was getting up at 3 or 4 in the morning most days (still do), concentrating on programming, on creating thousands of tarot-like cards for astrology in Adobe Illustrator, writing courses, and other text-related projects. And I took plenty of joy in that. All of these tasks were perfect to test out my Mahamudra practice, which was coming along really well. All it lacked was the motivation that comes with a worthy object, but my motivation was pretty good as it was.

In other words, I was practicing Mahamudra while working on essentially mundane tasks in addition to my on-the-cushion dharma practice, although my intent and motivation for astrology was very pure and heartfelt.

FREEFALL

Then, in late May, while attending an astrology conference in Denver, Colorado (along with 1,500 other astrologers), the head of the NBC outfit I was working for, who was also at the conference, told me that I no longer would have a job with them after June. In an attempt to pare down expenses, NBC laid off a lot of folks, and I happened to be one of them.

Of course, this was a real shock to me since I had been working so hard at it, and the financial ramifications simply meant that I would soon have no income whatsoever. At almost 67 years of age at the time, finding a job was probably not too easy, even though I had a lot of skills and experience, plus a good reputation. But it went beyond that for me. It was one of those corners life offers us that we somehow just have to get around.

No doubt, I was in shock. As it turned out, I had to leave the astrology conference a few days early when I found out that His Holiness the 17th Karmapa was suddenly making his first visit to the United States and to his main seat in this country, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (KTD) in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. This was our monastery, where my teacher lived! I could not miss that event and, as it turned out, I could be useful as part of a four-man video team to film the event, and personally I was able to

film some events where they didn't really want much of anyone present. I had been around KTD so long that I was pretty much some kind of fixture there anyway.

I would love to tell readers about the visit of His Holiness, but that would be a whole other story, but the gist of it was that seeing his holiness was a big shot in the arm for me, especially in the shocked state I was from being laid off. I also took hundreds of still photos of the event and within a few weeks of getting home, I had made a 200-page coffee-table sized book of the visit of His Holiness which I made available for the close sangha. The book was inspired, not so much by me as a photographer, as by the fact that all of the people I was photographing had just been with His Holiness and were shining with happiness and a light that was clearly obvious in the photographs.

Here is that book for those interested:

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/KarmapaKTD_2008.pdf

The time with His Holiness certainly helped to put the fact that I no longer had a job somewhat into perspective, but to suddenly be without a paycheck was, as mentioned, a shock, and it sure went through my system like a lightning. Where before I was working long hours at my job, suddenly I had all kinds of time on my hands – a really big gap of free time in my life, like all of it. Talking about popping out of what you were focused in (the so-called “gap” in Mahamudra practice), well, this was a really terrific gap, and I popped out big time and here is how I was able to actually look at that gap. This makes me wonder whether it takes some shock to the system to make us receptive for the deeper teachings. And, keep in mind that seeing His Holiness up close and the blessings that brought may have been key in precipitating what follows:

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

I had been working as an entrepreneur without a break (or a gap) for over thirty-five years straight. When you work for yourself, you don't have weekends off or holidays; at least you don't live for them. When you love your work, time off and vacations are meaningless or, worse, in my case, boring. That is how I always experienced them. And now, with all this time on my hands, my past interest in photography (and

recent photo work at KTD) began to come out, and this hobby plays a very important role in this story.

I had been deemed a photographer by my father (a really good photographer himself) ever since he had loaned me a little Kodak Retina Ila camera back in 1954, when I was something like 13 and sent me on about a 3,000 mile trip across the U.S. and Canada (with a dip into Mexico) on a bus with a bunch of kids my age. He had explained to me before I left how to take good pictures, and I listened. He also sent me off with a tripod, light meter, and close-up lenses.

Apparently, I had taken some great pictures because my dad couldn't say enough about them when I returned, perhaps the only time he ever felt that way about anything I have done. The long and the short of it is that I came away from that time of my dad's approval with the sense that (perhaps only in my mind) that I had a really-good eye for photography. It could be a self-fulfilling prophecy. LOL.

And I had been toying with photography for a number of years anyway. Like many of us, I had of course taken the requisite shots of my family, our dogs, and what not. And, as part of a large archival database that I created for documenting rock and roll posters, I had purchased a Nikon D1x system and carefully photographed some 33,000+ posters. For this, I had built my own vacuum table, had an exact light-setup, and so on. So, I knew at least something about photography.

Yet, in the late spring, after suddenly falling out of a job, I found myself embracing photography more deeply, perhaps just as a way to find stability from my somewhat chaotic life at the time. And then there was my interest in nature, and this is key. Even though this happened not so long ago, to this day I have trouble pinpointing just how I happened to start going out into nature again.

I am a trained naturalist and had intensely studied nature from the time I was about 6 years old until my late teens, and I mean intensely. In my early teens I was even given a tiny office at the University of Michigan Museums building, just because I was somewhat precocious. And the U-M sent me on a collecting trip for them throughout the south and Texas. I was into it.

My wife loves nature too and for the last many years had done all she could to get me out in the woods, streams, and fields again, but I pretty much declined the invitation. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps it was because I felt that nature had been early-on my first real teacher and I had learned my lessons. Certainly, school had taught me almost nothing. Whatever life lessons I carried came from observing how nature behaved and, once learned, I was unwilling to open up that avenue again. Why?

Now that I think about it, here is probably the reason: my favorite female vocalist of all time is Billie Holliday. No other voice has moved me so utterly than she has. That being said, the fact is that I don't listen to Billie Holliday very often, hardly ever. Why? Because, I have to really prepare myself or work up to hearing her sing, because she puts me through so very much emotionally that I am not always ready to let that happen. I tell you this because it is the same with nature and her lessons.

THE NATURALIST

I studied natural history for so many years and with such diligence that there was not much I missed as to what goes on out there in the woods and meadows. I know every frog, salamander, and snake, not to mention insects, and you-name-it. I not only know them; I know all about their lives and deaths. Nature is so absolutely candid and direct that she leaves almost nothing to the imagination. And nature does not know mercy. It is all laid out for anyone to see, and it is not a story without emotional affects. I did not need to become a Buddhist to love the life in every living creature. I always felt that way. When I was confirmed in my early teens as part of Catholic ritual, my chosen confirmation name was Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi, the saint who loved and protected animals. That was me. I have often joked that I like animals better than people, and I wasn't being all that funny. It is kind of true. I smile every time I even see an animal. The Buddhists tell us that animals are bewildered. I feel great compassion for their bewildered state. I am working on feeling that same way toward human beings. LOL.

And so, nature, like listening to Billie Holiday, was probably something that I really had to work up to as far as re-

immersion is concerned. It is just way too sensitive for words. Nature is beautiful, but nature is so raw. Every last animal out there lives in constant fear. They are always looking over their shoulder for something bigger than they are that wants to eat them. And they are always looking for some smaller animal to eat. They have almost no rest their entire lives. The whole concept of impermanence and the fragility of life are everywhere present in nature.

The countless tiny tadpoles that don't mature before the spring pond dries out, the mass of worms and slugs that get caught crossing the tarmac as the fierce sun comes over the horizon and fries them to a crisp, the huge Luna Moth that is so heavy it can hardly fly, flutters in the still morning light, trying to find a tree to hide in for the day, and is snapped up by the bird just as it tries to land, etc. You get the idea. It is endless and merciless.

And this is not an isolated story, not the exception that proves the rule, but just the opposite: this is the rule, with almost no exceptions, ever! Life is brief, fear-filled, and accident prone for almost all sentient life.

And humankind is not an exception, although we choose to ignore how Samsara (our confused state) actually is. We are one of the very few beings that have any real control over destiny, and we never have as much control as we imagine. The rest of the animal world are simply bewildered, too stunned by their lack of real intelligence to protect themselves.

I trust you get the idea here I am painting; it is one of a nature that has no mercy and death that is inexorable in its presence and swiftness. Is it any wonder that I had to cross over some kind of threshold to really want to take a closer look at nature again? I already knew what nature is about. You get the point.

BACK TO NATURE

Yet, in that year I was not in an ordinary frame of mind. I had just been shaken out of every sense of safe I knew, at least financially. I had been put out, turned loose, and set free from any path or trajectory I thought I was on. So, it is no surprise that I easily crossed over that threshold that I had avoided for

so many years and immersed myself once again in the way things actually were – Mother Nature.

I already was completely vulnerable, reminded personally as to how things can be when we have no control. I was, as they say, “in the mood.” And the camera was probably my ticket to ride, my excuse to get lost in nature once again. It was like finding my roots, like going home. Most of all, it was consoling. It was as authentic as I get.

And so, there I was, out in the fields and meadows looking at nature and seeing her, familiar friend that she was. I soon was photographing nature and became absolutely fascinated with close-up camera work, what is called macro photography. And for me, this meant close-up photography of nature and all the living things surrounding us. And, in what was perhaps also a symbolic gesture, I got out of my office. For years, I had been afraid to leave my office lest I miss an important phone call or whatever next thing I was waiting for. As mentioned, my wife had tried just about everything to get me out of my stick-in-the-mud office, but to no avail. But now I just walked out into the fields. For me, this was dramatic.

Each morning before dawn would find me out in the meadows and woods waiting for sunrise, lugging my camera equipment around. There in the mist and dew-covered fields I would be crawling around in the wet grass, soaking wet, and photographing all that was beautiful or, many times, just sitting there in the grass as the first sun rays peeked over the trees, and simply doing nothing. Here is a poem I wrote about that.

TIME FOR NOTHING

Excuse me for the moment,
No matter the reasons why,
I just need more time to do nothing,
But gaze into clear empty sky.

And I am not talking about weekends. Unless it rained, I watched almost every sunrise from around late May through October/November, until it became just too cold to take my camera or myself outside for extended periods of time. Think about that for a moment: I watched EVERY sunrise for half a year and this after seldom ever leaving my office for 30 or so

years. When was the last time you went out and watched the Sun rise? My family must have been puzzled.

As I look back on it now, it was of course a very remarkable time. Here I am remarking on it! Yet, what was most remarkable about this time was not at first apparent to me, and this is what I want to present here.

CLOSE-UP PHOTOGRAPHY AND MAHAMUDRA

The experience I had accumulated over the preceding three years or so doing Mahamudra practice on my computer had kind of extended itself to anytime I did close concentrated work of any kind. I am at home with drudgery, at home in very concentrated and tedious work. I need only point to that fact that I single-handedly (and later with a staff of hundreds) recorded, reviewed, and documented every piece of recorded music from 10-inch records on up to the present. Similarly, we documented every single film and movie, complete with its entire cast, and video games, and rock posters, etc. You get the idea. I am a little obsessive. My personal collection of CDs (which I no longer own) now sits in a library at Michigan State University, numbering well over 720,000 CDs and counting, and that was years ago. It could be much larger now.

My point is that I have a high tolerance for tedium. And nothing is more time consuming and demanding of concentration than computer programming and video editing, that was: before I encountered macro photography.

And I don't know for sure why I got into macro (close-up) photography, as opposed to landscape photography or just walking in the woods and meadows, but I have a guess. It could have been that looking through a light-giving lens with real magnification at a tiny diorama, at a world that was obviously ever so much more perfect than the one I was currently experiencing, was somehow freeing to me. Every tiny fly and insect appeared so incredibly complete, so perfect in every respect at the macro level.

The outer world I knew had beautiful patches and rotten ones too, areas that were stained beyond appreciation. But here, in the micro worlds, you could always find some little bit of perfection, perhaps a newly hatched dragonfly that was

absolutely fresh in every way. And I particularly like dioramas, miniature scenes - the tiniest of landscapes. I was transported by what I saw. I can tell you that nothing I have ever done requires as much patience and concentration as doing macro photography. It can take half an hour of excruciating pain to hold a physical position with a tripod and camera until the wind manages to die down or a bug stops moving, just to take a single photograph of a flower or insect. And I am NOT known for my patience, but in photographing nature I had found a worthy teacher.

HIGHLY-CORRECTED LENSES

Before long I was spending up to several of the best hours of the day (dawn) immersed in peering through various special lenses at the lives of tiny critters and plants. And I was seeing! I soon found myself searching for finer and finer lenses, so I could see ever more clearly into these very perfect micro worlds. Yet, I still couldn't see clearly enough, so I needed still better and better lenses. The outside day-to-day world I lived in might seem dingy and worn much of the time, but these micro worlds were as fresh as a new flower or a just-hatched butterfly. And: I was soaking it up.

Without really thinking about it, I was using all of my Mahamudra experience and techniques here in these micro worlds. And I literally mean: without thinking! As I concentrated on this photographing, looking deep into and through the lens, I began having extended periods of resting my mind, but I was not at first fully aware of this. I mean: it was true rest. As I look back now, I can see that I was (me, Michael) resting my mind and life in the tiny scenes I was peering through lenses to see. I was mixing my mind with nature. And I continued to double-down on it, recursively.

I was finding true rest in those miniature scenes I could see. And I so much needed the rest that I was not at first aware that I was (I believe) also resting my mind in a dharmic way, and in a profound sense. When I point out that I was not fully aware of what was happening, this is an important point.

Please keep in mind that I am holding a precise position, camera and tripod in hand, frozen to a stance, so that a tiny insect does not fly away, and waiting for the incessant

Michigan wind to die down long enough to take a photograph. And all the while I am peering through this very special light-gathering lens into a micro world at a tiny critter. And the clarity!

The world I could see in there was awesome, beautiful, and so very, very clear. I was resting in that clarity, resting my mind. And I loved what it did for me. It was beyond thought, beyond thinking. I was in all those sessions at rest.

For some reason, through the looking glass (so to speak), I was able to rest my mind like I had not been able to do it on the cushion or even in my work, and for a long time too! It would take a book to explain what resting the mind really is all about. No, a book could not communicate what I am referring to here. It would take being personally shown how to rest the mind, but I can't do that here and I am not a teacher.

Before I knew it, I was looking forward to these forays into the dawn as if my life depended on it. I could not wait to get up every morning, get outside in the fields, and launch myself into this particular state of mind. I knew this was connected to my practice, but that knowledge was not important at the time, which tells you something by itself. It was the farthest thing from my mind. I just liked getting my 'mind right' out there in nature. I was fascinated by what I saw through those lenses. In the end, of course, what I was seeing was my own mind and becoming familiar with it.

TURNING THE MIND

As I look back today, what was really taking place is all too clear, and nature held just the reminders I needed to keep my attitude adjusted. The four Common Preliminaries of Buddhist practice, what are often called the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma" are ever present in the natural world, things like the preciousness of life, impermanence, the laws of karma, etc. All of these are literally magnified and obvious in nature, where kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, and things like a flower that blooms for one night, a huge moth that lives but 24-hours, etc. continually reminded me of those precious four thoughts. I didn't have to remind myself. Life in nature reminded me instant by instant, day by day. It can be heartbreaking. I had not looked at impermanence this closely

for many years, but I was looking at it now. Mother Nature is the best reminder of the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind” that I know of. It is nothing but that.

For that spring, summer, and fall, I was really away from the maddening crowd, off by myself, observing my own mind in the midst of purely natural phenomena. But what I did not at first see was how much I was changing, perhaps ‘stabilizing’ is a better word. It was my mind and my practice that were stabilizing. When I was out in the field and flowers, I could rest my mind. I could see the nature of thoughts as they arose, look at their nature, watch them dissolve, and not drag around some sad thought all day long. I was literally thrilled at the crystal clarity of the mind. But most of all I was finding rest, resting my mind in all that clarity, deeply resting.

Where before I was probably engrossed in figuring out why so-and-so did this or that or how I managed to embarrass myself in this or that situation, now thoughts like that could be seen not for their content, but in their actual nature and they just dissolved like dew on the morning grass. In an instant they were gone, back where they came from, away, and I was not etching yet another karma-track deep in my mindstream.

Each morning I was up way before dawn, gathering my equipment and heading out the door. It seemed I could not get enough of what I was finding out there in nature, crawling in the wet grass, peering through my camera lenses, but in reality I was learning to rest in the true nature of my mind. I was practicing Mahamudra, but in a more direct manner than I ever before imagined.

I knew I was using Mahamudra techniques, but I was not initially aware of how deeply I was changing internally. That awareness only came much later. And I studied camera equipment like there was no tomorrow, in particular fine lenses. I just somehow could not get lenses that would gather enough light and open up my vision as far as I needed. Every spare dollar I could scrounge went into sharper and sharper lenses. I scavenged up and sold my older equipment for this or that more accurate lens, tele-converter, close-up diopter, or whatever would bring more light and acuity to what I was doing. And the highly-corrected lenses helped.

I studied lenses. I went to optometrists and discussed with them the sharpness of lenses and what was needed for the human eye to see at its very best. I got new glasses and special magnifiers for the eyepiece in my camera. I tracked down lenses that are almost never found, lenses that are legendary for their ability to gather light and to focus with extreme accuracy. I burned through the finest recent lenses that Nikon has to offer (and that is many) and on into lenses that are even better than anything Nikon can produce today.

I worked with special architectural lenses, lenses that tilt and shift, allowing you to bring a whole flat field of flowers into focus, the nearest and the farthest flower, all perfectly clear. I stacked lenses one on another to get even closer in. I used tele-converters, diopters, and extension tubes to reach beyond what I otherwise could. I moved on to what are called “technical” or “View” cameras, using medium-format lenses, ones that would tilt, sift, rise, fall, swing and back-tilt/swing, beasts that weighed more than fourteen pounds without lenses, etc.

And I began to stack photos, which means to take a series of photos, each at a particular focal point, from near-to-far, and then merge the entire stack to make a single image where all parts, from front to back are in perfect focus. Sometimes I took 200-400 photos to get one final image in focus.

I am just giving you a taste of what was a real obsession on my part, and an exponential learning curve. I took hundreds of thousands of photos during that period and beyond, and gradually became a better and better photographer. I never printed out one photo or put a single photo on the wall because I was not interested in the finished photo, but only in the process of photographing and the special form of “Seeing” that came out of it.

That is not such a lot of photos, until you take into consideration how long it can take for one macro photo to be taken. And through all of this, it was not the resulting thousands of photographs that concerned me. I hardly looked at them. Instead, it was the process that had me spellbound, the clear-looking at the subjects and the “Seeing.” It was about the seeing! And it was the resting.

Ostensibly, I was looking through finer and finer lenses at nature. In reality, I was learning to look at my own mind through the process of photography, and I had managed to confuse the two. Yeah, “Zen and the Art of Photography” is a book I could probably write now, but I am not a Zen practitioner. LOL.

I was learning to rest my mind in the moment and allow whatever natural beauty there was to present itself to me, to show itself, to appear. Everything was clear, luminous. And the sheer exhilaration involved is hard to describe. Everything was lucid. I was lucid – just clear as a bell! And you have to remember that I was being channeled by the sense of loss I was experiencing at having to income or way to make a living. That was a constant.

And, although I continued to practice Mahamudra during my ordinary workday, as I found this or that project to do, it was mostly in those rarified mornings, out in the dawn, that my mind could fully rest and appear lucid. I was addicted to it right off and could not wait each day to get out there at dawn among the bugs and flowers and get my mind right.

And, as mentioned above, this went on from late May until late November, almost every day when it did not rain. I don’t know what my family thought, other than I had become a camer-nut and that I didn’t have a job. I don’t know what I thought about it myself. I never thought about it. I was spending an inordinate amount of time doing it. My extended family, neighbors, and friends would drive by me where I was setting up one shot or another along the roadside and give me strange looks, like “Oops, there he is again. Doesn’t he work anymore?”

I didn’t have a job (I was looking for one), so I had the time and, after a lifetime of work running a business, this was the first real break I had ever given myself and I put it to good use. It was wonderful. It was transformative.

STABILIZATION

All of this time, what was really happening (as I look back now) is that my Mahamudra meditation was stabilizing. After all, I was doing it not only on those early morning shoots, but all the rest of the day as well, as much as I could happen to

remember or wake up into moments to do it, which was more and more often.

My initial fear and guilt that I was no longer interested in sitting practice, in doing sadhanas and other practices, began to fall away. I just did not care anymore what it looked like to those around me or even to my old self. Whatever it was that I was doing with Mahamudra and the camera was enough for me. I was full-up and I was in love with and happy with my dharma practice for the first time in my life.

It was just natural to move off the cushion for a while, after so many years sitting there. I had done two ngondros (traditional extended practices), not to mention other more complex deity practices, and I imagine I had accumulated what I was able to accumulate. I was tired for the moment of on-the-cushion practice and inhaled Mahamudra practice like a breath of fresh air. I was all-in!

It was clear to my family that I was no longer spending much time on the cushion and their looks and glances told me that they probably didn't approve and certainly didn't understand. After all, I didn't really understand myself what was happening. Michael, who had been more or less diligent as a practitioner for so many years (decades), was out-and-out playing hooky. There was no excusing it. And I made no excuse.

I just did not care. I knew I had found my way and was progressing somewhere after all the years of anticipation. I was my own counsel in this regard. Outside approval or disapproval (my own or others) could not change my mind or my behavior. And, so it went.

When summer ended and winter came on, I had to curtail my early morning explorations and gradually move back inside. I looked forward to the following spring with unusual longing, but I also found that I was able to carry on my mental training at my desk and around the house with no problem. Something had changed within me and permanently, but I was not really able to get a handle on it until the following spring, when I was once again headed back out into the fields and woods. And that's another story which I will relate tomorrow or soon.

MEETING CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE

July 17, 2019

I grew up in the late 1950s and early 1960s with Buddhism as one of the topics (along with Existentialism, etc.) that were sometimes savored late at night along with plenty of caffeine and cigarettes. By the early 1970s, it was becoming clear that Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular, held something special for me.

I had been reading the early books of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. At first, stunned by the incredible art on the covers and only later by the content, I was thrilled to see that Trungpa Rinpoche was coming to speak in my home town of Ann Arbor, Michigan. I saw the small notices posted around campus of this event to be held on February 12th of 1974. It was like a dream, a magical illusion.

I called the folks who were putting on his talk to find more details, and found that they were really short-handed. And so, I ended up as Trungpa Rinpoche's chauffeur for the weekend, plus I became the designer of the poster for the event. I couldn't wait to go and pick Rinpoche up at the airport.

Driving to the airport in my old beat-up ford station wagon, I got there early and waited at the runway gate for Trungpa Rinpoche to deplane. Finally it landed, and people poured down the gateway, but no Tibetans. And then, when I was beginning to worry, almost the very last person out was one rather short Tibetan. We saw each other. And I knew he was travelling with Larry Mermelstein, who later became a friend and headed up the Nalanda Translation Committee.

And finally, there Trungpa was, standing before me and looking directly at me – eyeballs to eyeballs. He was really close to me and I could see that his eyes looked very tired; somehow, the whites of his eyes were all yellow. Then a strange thing happened. Trungpa rolled his eyes upward toward the top of his head until I could hardly see the pupils, and when they came back, all the tiredness and yellowness were completely gone. And there I was staring into the eyes of perhaps the wildest human being I had ever encountered.

It was an incredible moment. Suddenly, there “HE” was. Wow! No disappointment.

I drove Trungpa and Mermelstein back from the Detroit airport to the professor Donald S. Lopez, Jr.’s house in Ann Arbor, where they were staying. There was quite a group of people waiting in the house to greet Rinpoche. I was not sure I was welcome to remain there or not, so I just kind of hung around the edges at the back of the room hoping to get some more clues as to what this incredible man or “being” was all about..

And then Trungpa announced that he wanted to take a little nap and everyone suddenly got up and left for a tour of the U. of M. campus. I waited for them to file out. And, as I turned to leave, I was astonished to see Trungpa Rinpoche motioning for me to stay. And he led me into a small library/office room and sat me down on a wooden chair. Of course, this was beyond my wildest fantasies. And so, there I sat, not knowing just how to behave.

Next, Trungpa opened a small bottle of saki, drank some, and then proceeded to inspect just about every item in the room. He was very animated, lifting each little memento from its shelf, sometimes holding things up to the light and peering through them, and so on. He did a pretty complete inventory of whatever was in the room. And all this time I sat there, afraid to move, taking this all in. I was learning what ‘activity’ could mean and realized that I was never free enough to myself behave like that.

And then, before I knew it, Trungpa was inspecting me and addressing me. He then proceeded for the next hour and something to thoroughly instruct me in Shamata meditation, his own variety, but he never called it that. In fact, he never told me what he was doing. He just proceeded to instruct me to watch my breath, and nervous as I was, I did my best to watch the breath go out and come back in again.

As mentioned, all the while he nursed his saki, as he carefully monitored what I was doing. In particular, it seemed that he was concerned with my “out” breath – breathing out. Somehow, I was not letting it go out far enough to please him. “Michael, let your breath go all the way out... all the way!” he

would say. And as I nervously struggled to do so, he remarked, “Don’t worry, it will come back!”

And I did my best, but it was not as simple as just following his directions. A lot of deep stuff was happening at the same time. As I breathed out more deeply, it seemed that my whole life-long fear of letting go, of dying and death, flashed through my mind. I struggled with it in the moment, and then just let go and breathed out deeply. As the breath went out, my life-long fear of death and dying vanished. And I have never been as afraid of death again. Perhaps this particular moment marked the beginning of my actual dharma practice. Certainly Trungpa Rinpoche was an authentic teacher and our meeting auspicious for me.

And although, after that weekend, I did not see Trungpa Rinpoche again, I have never forgotten his concern for and kindness with me. I was invited to join or hang out with his sangha, but they were really into drinking and wearing suits and ties. Someone has to die to see me in a suit, and as a performing musician, I had already more than had my fill of alcohol. It was just not the scene for me.

I went on to discover my Root Lama in the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and become very involved with KTD Monastery in Woodstock, NY, and have trained there for the last 36 years or so. However, Trungpa Rinpoche opened a door for me that has never closed. And he had no shadow that I could see.

I have two more little anecdotes from his visit to Ann Arbor that year. One was the local occult bookstore owner, a friend of mine, who was shocked to see Trungpa standing in the wings of the theater smoking, and was brazen enough to ask him why he was smoking? Trungpa’s response to that: “Someone might like to see me smoke.”

The other event was when I dropped Trungpa Rinpoche off at the airport. I tried to tell him that he was just about the first person I had ever met in my life that I did not feel any personal resistance to or criticism of. I am very critical. His response to me was: “Well Michael, we are both married men and we are about the same age.” And with that, we shook hands and said goodbye.

While we were together at the professor's house, Trungpa saw the poster I had made hanging on the wall for his talk. He knew I created it and asked me about it. (see the image here). Trungpa asked me if I knew what this image of a flying dragon holding four precious gems in his claws was all about. I told him that I did not know and that to me the image was just striking and suited (to my mind) his visit.

He then proceeded to point out to me that the dragon in the woodcut holds four precious pearls or gems, one in each claw. As long as the dragon has a grasp of all four pearls, he can fly, but if he drops even one of them, he plunges to the ground. I later came to understand that he was talking about what are called the Common Preliminaries, the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma." I understood that these four thoughts are essential for any further practice – all four of them.

For those who don't remember or have never seen the four thoughts are:

- (1) The preciousness of human birth
- (2) Impermanence
- (3) The inevitability of karma
- (4) The undependability of Samsara]

These are the four thoughts that turn the mind, and for many of us, these are the door through which we entered Buddhism. The Four Thoughts are a large part of why I found the dharma, because as a naturalist I already intuitively knew how precious all life is, especially a human birth, the First Thought.

And, through my study of nature, I was reminded every day of the absolute impermanence of all creature's lives, the Second Thought, not to mention the inexorable effect of cause and effect, which signifies the Third Thought. As for the Fourth Thought, "that we will never get all our ducks in a row," no matter how we try, that took me a while.

Years ago, I wrote a little poem (kind of corny) on the four thoughts.

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND TO THE DHARMA

This precious life,
Impermanent and brief,
I know.

My actions keep on piling up,
And I can't quite get my ducks all in a row.

Trungpa said to me,
So many years ago,
By grasping just one thought or two,
We'll never turn aside.

We must, he said, maintain all four,
And leave not one behind.

Four precious thoughts that touch the heart,
Only they can turn the mind.

And these Common Preliminaries, these four thoughts that are capable of turning the mind toward the dharma, were not just my entry into the dharma. Many years later, as I undertook Mahamudra training, I spent three whole years working with nothing other than these same four thoughts, so they are not just for beginners.

OUR BEING IS BECOMING

July 19, 2019

[Something that I have always been puzzled by is our “being” and what the Tibetans have to say about being and emptiness. Take this little poem I wrote long ago.

SEMANTICS

It's not just that being,
Is empty;
It's that there is,
An emptiness,
Of being.

It's never been there.

From my view, “Be Here Now” is a request, not a statement. At best, it's wishful thinking, IMO, not the relaxing, but the “being.” What is meant by it? The “reality” (or lack thereof) of being is what interests me. “To be or not to be?” was Hamlet's question, suggesting a choice. I don't see the choice.

From looking at dharma texts, the question I come away with is more like: “Is our being only becoming; has it never been actual being?” Have we never yet even “been?” Or, as my little poem says: “Is there an emptiness of being?” Are we empty of being?

The dharma texts almost universally say that there is no permanent being as in our having an “eternal soul,” etc. As we say, “Everything is change but change itself.” And so, at best, our being is only just becoming, and will never actually “be.” It never has “been.”

Do we have a becoming being? Is that the emptiness that we cannot fill and yet still feel? Can we feel the emptiness of a being that we have never had?

In fact, as the dharma suggests, are we wandering in a dream we can't seem to wake up from called life? And is our life as empty of permanent being as our dreams in the night? Are we forever grasping at something that was never even there? And if it was never there, how do we know that it's missing?

I wrote this little poem just now, to help keep this thought in mind.

BEING IS BECOMING

A Being that does not become us,
We've been empty of,
Since who knows when.
How can we be empty of,
A Being that's never been?

DAKINI

July 20, 2019

[This is the type of blog I am doing my best to move away from because it is perhaps too difficult to understand and elicits few questions or discussion. However, just for the record, this is often what I spend my precious time grasping at, although I know it cannot be put into words. They say insanity is performing the same actions over and over and expecting a different result. In my case, I try to put into words (over and over) what cannot be put into words.]

DAKINI

Unconditional love,
Has no conditions.
It accepts,
The exceptions.

Total receptivity,
Takes you in,
Until you know,
Nothing.

Emptiness,
Contains everything,
And that includes,
Nothing.

A word in the dharma vocabulary surrounded with some mystery is “Dakini.” “Dakini” is a Sanskrit word, and in the Tibetan language the word is “Khandro” (or Khandroma) which means “SkyGoer” or “Sky Walker” or “Sky Dancer.” In my personal understanding, Dakini is a form of total receptivity or female-energy that represents the activity of freely moving everywhere through space -- unbounded. There are said to be six kinds of “Enlightened Dakinis” and three worldly Dakinis.

In my limited vernacular, a Dakini can function as a muze, a special form of receptivity which results in what I call freefall. We let go. I consider Dakini energy similar (or identical) to what is called a yidam in Vajrayana practice, both of which

can assist practitioners (like handrails or lifelines) in moving from duality to one-ness -- non-duality.

The last sentence in the above poem gives the false impression that “emptiness” is a container. That’s poetry talking, written when I was younger. The following little poem gives, IMO, a better view of “emptiness,” the idea that appearances and emptiness are connate, two sides of the same coin.

EMPTINESS

It’s not just that
Appearances that arise
Are empty.

It’s that appearances are
the emptiness arising.

OUR ATTACHMENT TO THE DHARMA

July 21, 2019

[Yesterday, it was all Legos, all the time, meaning all day. This, with my 5-year-old granddaughter Iris and me. She likes when I watch her build Legos, but mostly she wants me to work with her each step of the way. No problem. I built for her a Lego computer and what I call a "Dragon Sled," which she coveted. We each build the same item (something we make up) and then we trade; she gives me hers and I give her the one I built. She likes that.

A sudden rain and fierce wind storm arose in the day and took us by surprise, tearing limbs from trees, soaking my office before I could get to the windows, blowing out the screens, knocking over things, etc., and breaking and turning over plants set outdoors for the summer and on and on. The winds also trashed my Tansy plants. I will have to try and prop them up. It was very close to a tornado or at least what we call "Shear Winds," which can tear down fences and anything standing up. And then: total torrential rain, almost like a waterfall, rain so heavy that things were soaked before you could move to close a window.]

And now for some blogginess.

When words fail, what is communicated? Not much. Some experiences and all realizations are what are called ineffable, meaning they cannot be put into words. Yet, many of us have read and still study all kinds of books, some of them on spiritual topics which are, practically speaking, ineffable. Again, what is communicated? Why do we keep trying to express the inexpressible?

I can't say for you, but for me it's because I would like to share something of the dharma with others. It's that simple. Or, it's because I have had such a very hard time understanding dharma and its practice, that I don't want anyone else to have to go through what I did.

Mostly, I know what NOT to do and that from bitter experience. LOL. The dharma is the most useful tool I have ever come across, and that by an order of magnitude or

better. Just because I go on and on about the dharma does not make me a dharma teacher. I don't consider myself a teacher or even want that kind of responsibility. I am a "sharer" of dharma information as best I understand it, and from my direct experience if I can.

That wish to share dharma is what drives me and that is traditionally called "Bodhicitta." That is about as much as I have going for me, this unrelenting wish to share the dharma with others. I am attached to it and doing my best to un-attach myself. Speaking of attachment...

I learned from my recent stroke how useless attachment is, even attachment to dharma, when the stroke wiped out all my attachment completely for quite a time. As a dharma student, I'm glad to lose attachment, but I guess I always secretly made an exception for my attachment to the dharma. The dharma is a good thing, so attachment to dharma is really OK, and should be grandfathered into things that are acceptable. Wrong!

Of all the things I lost in the stroke (as relates to attachment is concerned), I was dumbfounded and horrified most to find that ANY attachment to the dharma was completely obliterated like any other attachment. Just gone AWOL and instantly at that. Gone and no residue. None. No credit for attachment.

And so, I tell myself that there is no point that I can see in being attached to the dharma, any more than there is to be attached to more mundane things like entertaining ourselves, distracting ourselves, and fixating on anything. For sure, I was (and still try to be) fixated on the dharma.

When my attachment to dharma was instantly removed, I wandered in the wilderness of non-attachment for weeks, shocked and horrified that all that dharma attachment (and years) added up to nothing at all! As they say, that and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus.

This was for me a warning and certification that at death, our specific attachments are voided, even though our tendency to be attached marches on, carefully recorded as karma traces in the Storehouse Consciousness – the Alayavijnana.

And so, I'm going through a little retribution and house-cleaning when it comes to my assumptions about and attachment to the dharma. Just as the pith texts say, any realization I had over the years (and ability to practice), for example Vipassana or Mahamudra Meditation, was left intact. That was clear sailing. Nothing changed. However, the amount of my realization is dwarfed by my attachment to dharma and the credit I awarded myself. LOL.

What was lost is all of my imagined bonus points, any dharma credit given to me by "me, myself and I," and all that hogwash for good dharma done. LOL. I, literally, had to start over from the beginning as far as developing a patina of attachment to the dharma. And that kind of effort to attach seems simply repulsive at this point, especially where the dharma is concerned.

And, LOL, worst of all was the sense of being stripped of all dharma rank, with no credit given (except for actual realization) for all the dharma attachment I had engendered, and years put in. Mindless rote practice, just saying the words, while perhaps not totally useless, are for the most part of no lasting value. So, don't count on mindlessly going through the motions getting you to dharma heaven. I don't think so!

Let that be a lesson for me. Let that be some information for you to keep in mind.

THE INTERNET COUP

July 22, 2019

What keeps us going? What gets us up in the morning? How thin is that thread of our continuity from day to day? If we break it (or it breaks), how far do we sink and where do we end up? For me, these are real questions. I am very much into the present moment and what it offers.

Writing my blog each day or so establishes some continuity, but for me it can be like building a bridge too far. I have a group of Facebook Friends that indicate support by their "Likes" each day. I am grateful because someone is interested! However, there is very little discussion or even questions on my page, so I can't depend on that as the only thread. It's just me talking, which is kind of one-sided. LOL. Mostly I am supported by my own enthusiasm for the dharma, but there are two trains running.

The other train is photography and I spend some time on photography forums, but they are a rougher crowd than Facebook. As a bit of an expert on forums, I have been publishing forums on the Internet before the World-wide Web existed. I ran music and film forums under contract with CompuServe in 1994. This was when the web was just forming; before then, there were only what were called "gopher holes." I ran the All-Music Guides using gopher holes.

So, I have a relatively (in digital time) long history on the Internet. After all, according to an article written for the magazine "Red Herring," the software company I founded "Matrix Software" is the second oldest software company still on the Internet, the oldest being a little company called Microsoft. So, I have been there a while. In fact, I ran 110 forums on New Age topics for Microsoft when they launched MSN, the Microsoft Network around 1995.

And so, while not as friendly as my page (and readers) here on Facebook are, the Photo forums interest me technically, although many professional photographers are on-the-ropes financially, or close to it, thanks to everyone using iPhones

(and so on) to take their own photos. And photographers, as a group, are not interested in dharma or spiritual things, at least in my experience.

Those of us who were early adopters (I had email in 1979) of the Internet technology, many of us were blocked from being part of the business-end of society. For example, I never graduated from high school and therefore many avenues to corporate society were blocked for me. Luckily I (and many others like me) taught myself about the digital age and could hack the computer world.

In fact, what I consider perhaps the most unsung, yet important, event in my life was how people like me and thousands of other folks from the Sixties (alternative culture folks), folks blocked from social advancement in the ordinary ways, simply waltzed in the back door of technology and, more or less, took over the Internet. It was largely built on the labor of hackers and those in love with digital technology. We did it for fun and to learn, but it became a way of life and eventually actually lucrative enough at some point down the line.

We hackers founded our own Internet society, call us dorks, nerds, or geeks; we didn't care. We were not athletic, handsome, or beautiful, but we didn't give a damn, because we were too engrossed with actually changing society forever, if only for ourselves. And, as mentioned, we walked in the back door and took over a key component of life, digital technology. The people in power had no idea what we were doing and made little to no effort to stop us. It was a silent coup, but one with broad consequences that still ring today.

So, what keeps me going (and busy) aside from my family (kids and grandkids) is the dharma, with a good amount of photography on the side. I am retired from digital technology, which marches on without me. When the dharma wanes in reader's interest, I spend more time on photography. I would rather work more with dharma, but there is not the interest or questions it would take. Still, dharma is my main interest. After that, photography.

For example, right now I am exploring a new lens, which is the Voigtlander 21mm Nokton f/1.4 Aspherical Lens for the

Sony E-Mount that is an APO (highly-corrected) lens which I have adapted for use on the Nikon Z-Mount camera Z7. This is a very special lens that is, as mentioned, highly color-corrected and perfect for my work. I have not learned to use the lens well enough yet, but I am working on it.

Included here is one of my first photographs with the lens, a little corner of my desk in my workroom. That is a cloisonné vase from China that my grandmother gave to my mother who gave it to me. I love the colors. Also, a hand-painted watercolor of a house wren by nature artist John Felsing.

Not a great photo, but it signals to me of the potential for my use for such a lens, if I will work on it. And I will.

And so that's today.

“BLUES IN BLACK AND WHITE”

July 23, 2019

I got a request to write something about blues music and the many great blues musicians I have met, listened to, and interviewed back in the 1960s and later; that, and their influence on me. Before I launch into this, I should paint the background for me back in those days, so you see how I fit in.

For reasons I don't understand, as a child I was very hard to teach. Perhaps I was just thick-headed or stupid. In fact, in early grade-school, the teachers and the school thought I might be having difficulty learning, so they had me tested for my IQ level, to see if I was retarded. I, of course, had no idea what they were doing. I was just a kid. Well, it turned out I actually was not stupid, but just bored. As it turned out, I had a high IQ. LOL.

It seemed that if I did not respect a teacher, I tuned them out and preferred to spend my class time just in my own mind. And by “respect,” that came to mean for me that I respected them as people and for their life wisdom, i.e. that they walked their talk and just did not mouth words. Very few (maybe one or one-and-a-half) teachers in all those years got any respect from me; otherwise nothing they said interested me. It was my loss, of course, but I was not even aware of it. I couldn't hear them unless they communicated directly with their life-wisdom.

If you were an astrologer (which a thousand or so on this blog are), you might understand that in my heliocentric natal chart (only in that coordinate system), which is what I call the “Dharma Chart,” I have six of the nine planets forming a perfect Grand Trine (three points 120-degrees apart making an equilateral triangle). An equilateral triangle is the perfect way to avoid sending a cross (like a T-Square) through the center of the circle, and I have no T-Cross in my natal chart. This makes me VERY sensitive to physical stimulus or haptics of any kind. Therefore (here comes the “therefore”), it makes me super sensitive to direct stimulus (hard aspects), yet NOT interested in conceptuality, which I already have in spades, so to speak. Bottom line: don't come at me with concepts but be

direct and practical. That's as brief an astrological comment and I can come up with. LOL.

In fact, I finally just quit high school and hitchhiked out to Venus West in Santa Monica and lived along the beach in the basement of an art gallery back then called the "Gas House," trying my best to be an artist painting in oils. LOL. I wanted to feel life and live it, not study, talk, and listen to lectures. I hungered for haptics, the tactile, hands-on living of life.

This hunger for the "real" precipitated years of hitchhiking and bending over backward on my part to get "down" to the level of real life. The Beat Movement and beatniks fascinated me and I did all I could to join that tribe, but as time would have it, they were already fading to reinventing themselves. Their time had passed, but I learned all that I could about life from them, in Venus West, North Beach San Francisco, and Greenwich Village, NYC. From the Beats I learned about the Liberal Arts – music, dance, art, and literature. Later I was part of a pre-Hippie generation. We taught the hippies about those subjects.

I also had been part of the Folk Music Revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s, hitchhiking and traveling with great players like Perry Lederman and Bob Dylan, also hanging with Joan Baez, the New Lost City Ramblers, the Country Gentleman, Jack Elliot, and so on. Later yet, I became a musician and band leader, playing and hanging with people like Jerry Garcia, opening for groups like the Shangri-Las, The Contours, Cream (Eric Clapton), and others. In my band, Iggy Pop was our drummer; we named him "Iggy," etc. Which brings me to the point of this blog. Still later yet, I served on the board of the Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival and The Ark (folk venue) and once again was in charge of feeding and caring for artists, a fun job.

When, in my study of American folklore and reviving it, I came across country blues, I wanted to revive it to, but soon came to discover that blues, especially city blues, did not need revival. It was very much still alive and playing across town, divided only by a racial curtain. Once I heard live blues and began to hear and meet the great blues players, I found in them the grandfathers I never had. Aside from their music, these were life teachers I could listen to and savvy adults that

I could respect. They walked their talk, IMO. I not only loved their music, but could hear from their words an understanding of life I never had, but thirsted for.

Thanks to being involved with the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals (1969, 1970), and later in the first two Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festivals (1972, 1973), I got to meet almost all of the blues players. My brother Daniel and I, because we knew this music and had a blues band that everyone around Ann Arbor knew, were asked to be in charge of caring for all the performers, seeing they had drinks (like alcohol) and plenty of food, we got to meet and know many of the performers up close and personal. We were very popular because we had all the free booze. Before I knew it, I was interviewing scores of them with audio and later with video. Meeting and knowing them changed my life forever. In that time, I was totally present like I had never been up to then!

Listening to these great blues players, hanging out, drinking with them, talking with them, I found the grandfather-surrogates that I had never had. I loved their music, but also I could hear their words of life-wisdom and drank it in like there was no tomorrow. Not all Black blues performers were able to be friendly, but the majority were and many of them were experiencing being loved and appreciated by a White audience for the first time.

Those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals were hallmark events, where an entire genre of blues musicians (en masse) met and mingled with a White audience. Even today, there has never been a greater coming together of blues players than those first two festivals. It was not long after that first concert in 1969 that the great Black blues artists began to pass on. In fact, those two festivals were something of a celebration among the Black blues players who had never been together with each other in that kind of quantity up to then. It was like a family reunion.

And so, from these players I learned to trust the life knowledge of older people and felt their compassion toward me and general kindness.

Years later, I met the Tibetan lamas and Rinpoches and in them I also found beings with life-savvy that I could learn from

and they did not have the alcohol and drug problems that many of the blues performers had. Included here are just some of the photos I was able to find of me back then as an interviewer.

Also, included is a photo of the award-winning book "Blues in Black & White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals," with photos by my friend Stanley Livingston, book designed by my brother Tom Erlewine, and text, history, and album reviews for each artist by me. I have written or edited a number of books on the blues over the years.

Here are only some of the many blues performers (or advocates) back then that I met, listened to, and many I interviewed with.

Stan Abernathy (trumpet) Otis Rush Band, Dave Alexander (vocals piano), Luther Allison (guitar vocals) & the Blue Nebulae, Willie Anderson (harmonica), Carey Bell (harmonica), Fred Below (drums), Big Joe Turner (vocals), Bobby Blue Bland (vocals), Juke Boy Bonner (harmonica vocals), Cassell Burrow , Leroy Campbell (bass), Clifton Chenier (accordion), James Cotton (harmonica), Pee Wee Crayton (guitar vocals), Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup (guitar vocals), Jimmy 'Fast Fingers' Dawkins (guitar vocals), Doctor Ross (harmonica vocals guitar), Sleepy John Estes (guitar vocals), Lowell Fulson (guitar vocals), Paul Garon (blues writer), Ernest Gatewood (bass) Otis Rush Band, Buddy Guy (guitar vocals), Phillip Guy (guitar) Buddy Guy Band, Ted Harvey (drums) Hound Dog Taylor Band, John Lee Hooker (guitar vocals), Howlin' Wolf (guitar vocals harmonica), J.B.Hutto & the Hawks (guitar vocals), Bruce Iglaur (Alligator Records), John Jackson (guitar vocals banjo), Calvin Jones (bass) Howlin' Wolf Band, Albert King (guitar vocals), B.B.King (guitar vocals), Freddy King (guitar vocals), Bob Koester (Delmark Records), Sam Lay (drums vocals), Hopkins Lightnin' (guitar vocals), Manse Lipscomb (guitar vocals), Little Joe Blue (guitar vocals), Robert Jr. Lockwood Junior (guitar vocals), Lazy Bill Lucas (piano), Magic Sam (guitar vocals), Jim Marshall (photos), Mississippi Fred McDowell (guitar vocals), John Meggs (tenor sax) Otis Rush Band, Little Brother Montgomery (piano vocals), Muddy Waters (guitar vocals), Charlie Musselwhite (harmonica

vocals), Louis Myers (lead guitar harmonica), Paul Oliver (blues writer), Jim Oneil (Living Blues Magazine), Tom Osterman , Papa Lightfoot (harmonica vocals), Junior Parker (harmonica vocals), Brewer Phillips (lead guitar) Hound Dog Taylor Band, A.C.Reed (sax), Jimmy Reed Jr. (vocals guitar) Hound Dog Taylor Band, Bob Reidy (piano vocals), Freddy Roulette (guitar steel guitar), Otis Rush (guitar vocals), Roosevelt Shaw (drums), Johnnie Shines (guitar vocals), Harmonica George Smith (harmonic vocals), Son House (guitar vocals), Victoria Spivey (vocals), Chris Strachwitz (label owner), Hubert Sumlin (guitar vocals), Sunnyland Slim (piano), Roosevelt Sykes (piano vocals), Eddie Taylor (guitar vocals), Hound Dog Taylor (guitar vocals), Big Mama Thornton (vocals), Jeff Todd Titon (guitar) Lazy Bill Lucas Blues Band, Johnny Twist , Eddie Cleanhead Vinson (vocals sax), T-Bone Walker (guitar vocals), Sippie Wallace (vocals), Dick Waterman (manager), Junior Wells (vocals harmonica), Big Joe Williams (vocals), Robert Pete Williams (guitar vocals), Johnny Winter (guitar vocals), Little Johnny Woods (harmonica), Johnny Young (guitar vocals mandolin), Mighty Joe Young (guitar vocals), Abernathy (trumpet) Otis Rush Band, Dave Alexander (vocals piano), Luther Allison (guitar vocals) & the Blue Nebulae, Willie Anderson (harmonica), Carey Bell (harmonica), Fred Below (drums), Big Joe Turner (vocals), Bobby Blue Bland (vocals), Juke Boy Bonner (harmonica vocals), Cassell Burrow , Leroy Campbell (bass), Clifton Chenier (accordion), James Cotton (harmonica), Pee Wee Crayton (guitar vocals), Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup (guitar vocals), Jimmy 'Fast Fingers' Dawkins (guitar vocals), Doctor Ross (harmonica vocals guitar), Sleepy John Estes (guitar vocals), Lowell Fulson (guitar vocals), Paul Garon (blues writer), Ernest Gatewood (bass) Otis Rush Band, Buddy Guy (guitar vocals), Phillip Guy (guitar) Buddy Guy Band, Ted Harvey (drums) Hound Dog Taylor Band, John Lee Hooker (guitar vocals), Howlin' Wolf (guitar vocals harmonica), J.B.Hutto & the Hawks (guitar vocals), Bruce Iglaur (Alligator Records), John Jackson (guitar vocals banjo), Calvin Jones (bass) Howlin' Wolf Band, Albert King (guitar vocals), B.B.King (guitar vocals), Freddy King (guitar vocals), Bob Koester (Delmark Records), Sam Lay (drums vocals), Hopkins Lightnin' (guitar vocals), Manse Lipscomb (guitar

vocals), Little Joe Blue (guitar vocals), Robert Jr. Lockwood Junior (guitar vocals), Lazy Bill Lucus (piano), Magic Sam (guitar vocals), Jim Marshall (photos), Mississippi Fred McDowell (guitar vocals), John Meggs (tenor sax) Otis Rush Band, Little Brother Montgomery (piano vocals), Muddy Waters (guitar vocals), Charlie Musselwhite (harmonica vocals), Louis Myers (lead guitar harmonica), Paul Oliver (blues writer), Jim Oneil (Living Blues Magazine), Tom Osterman , Papa Lightfoot (harmonica vocals), Junior Parker (harmonica vocals), Brewer Phillips (lead guitar) Hound Dog Taylor Band, A.C.Reed (sax), Jimmy Reed Jr. (vocals guitar) Hound Dog Taylor Band, Bob Reidy (piano vocals), Freddy Roulette (guitar steel guitar), Otis Rush (guitar vocals), Roosevelt Shaw (drums), Johnnie Shines (guitar vocals), Harmonica George Smith (harmonic vocals), Son House (guitar vocals), Victoria Spivey (vocals), Chris Strachwitz (label owner), Hubert Sumlin (guitar vocals), Sunnyland Slim (piano), Roosevelt Sykes (piano vocals), Eddie Taylor (guitar vocals), Hound Dog Taylor (guitar vocals), Big Mama Thorton (vocals), Jeff Todd Titon (guitar) Lazy Bill Lucas Blues Band, Johnny Twist , Eddie Cleanhead Vinson (vocals sax), T-Bone Walker (guitar vocals), Sippie Wallace (vocals), Dick Waterman (manager), Junior Wells (vocals harmonica), Big Joe Williams (vocals), Robert Pete Williams (guitar vocals), Johnny Winter (guitar vocals), Little Johnny Woods (harmonica), Johnny Young (guitar vocals mandolin), and Mighty Joe Young (guitar vocals). There are a lot more that I have met in the years since then.

PHOTOGRAPHY REVEALS

July 24, 2019

I get a lot of requests about how I approach photography, so here is a quick once-over that may be helpful to those of you interested in exploring close-up photography. Plus, see links below for free books, videos on photography, and a gallery of photos to back this up.

I have always been interested in nature photography, ever since I was 14-years old. My father was an accomplished photographer. And, my interest was further galvanized and became “hard-wired” when, quite by accident, I mixed my nature photography with my meditation practice and went through my first actual dharma-realization while taking close-up nature photos some years ago. For a while, if I wanted to meditate in this special way, I had to grab my camera, go out in the meadows and fields, and take photos. LOL.

It took me some years to extract my meditation practice from my photography, but I did manage it. It took real work. However, I still love to photograph, like a fish loves water. And so, those of you who like the style of my photography and want to try it out for yourselves, I have lots of videos and free e-books on how to do this.

Free e-Books on Photography

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx#Photography>

Free Videos on Focus-Stacking

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist...>

Photo Gallery

<https://michaerlewine.smugmug.com/>

The way I like to make photographs probably has some bit of philosophy about it. I like the sense of dream-like emptiness that the dharma points out, i.e. that we are empty of any permanent soul or being; in that sense, we are not unlike a hologram, empty of any permanent existence. To my eye, that is the bokeh (also called bouquet), the blurry out-of-focus areas of the photo, what dharma folks call the “magical illusion” we wander in called life. This life we live is hollow of

being or another way to put this is that our being is only “becoming,” and has not ever been really present. As Shakespeare wrote “We are such stuff as dreams are made of.”

I also like to make sure some part or portion of the image is precisely in-focus. Many of my images have a small or larger portion of the image in precise focus. And it may be that the tiniest part of the image is in focus, like the dot on the letter “I.” What does it represent? It represents that part of me that is tied to this world of illusion, what keeps me in this world and still unenlightened, call it relative truth or whatever dualism I am fixated upon; it’s also the tail of the kite that keeps me upright, that which I still have to transform or learn. In other words, this fixating focus is what keeps me from recognizing that I am dreaming.

Photographers each have their own style; this, apparently, is my style. I kind of grew into it, often to my own surprise. I used to be kind of ashamed of my style being too “pretty,” but I finally gave up and gave in to just liking it that way. Why, because I liked it. LOL. I’m corny, perhaps a romantic, and I like dreamy misty mornings too. LOL. People, other photographers, have told me that they can spot one of my photos right off and know that I took it. So, I guess I have a style.

TECHNIQUES

I will say something about the techniques I use. For me it’s all about lenses. If we have what is called a “fast” lens, which means that wide-open its aperture number is low, like 2.8 or 2.5 or sometimes 1.2 or even 0.95, then that is wide open. This then produces out-of-focus bokeh (also called bouquet). At the same time, a fast or wide lens means that depth-of-field (DOF, how much of the whole picture is in focus) is very narrow, often razor thin. So, if we take a photo with the lens wide open, we get this razor thin DOF, meaning not much of the photo is perfectly in focus.

So, if we can live with a dreamy out-of-focus image, with only a bit in focus, then a fast (wide-open) lens is the one to use. However, there is a way to keep the dreamy out-of-focus areas in the photo and still have a lot more of the photo in

focus. This is done by what is called “Focus Stacking,” which simply is taking a series of photos each a step closer (or farther back) from the last one and then compiling or merging those photos into a single image. That series can be anything from a few layers to several hundred layers contributing to a single image. In that way, we can have a dreamy background, with as much as we want in focus. Of course, it is a bit of work taking all those photos and then, using special software, stacking them, and finally retouching the artifacts that are often unavoidable. That’s how I create images that I like, ones that satisfy me. These images also compliment how I believe life is.

I do know something about lenses. I am not a lens mechanic, but using lenses I do and carefully. And, I have experimented with a lot of lenses over time, probably something like 150 different lenses, most of them very special lenses, what are called “exotic” lenses for this or that reason. I buy, then experiment with them, and sell off the ones that are not useful for my work. That way I keep trading up so that all I have left are useful lenses. Many of these lenses cost thousands of dollars each, so I have to sell off the ones I don’t use to afford the ones I can.

Many of my lenses are what is called “apochromatic” (APO), which means that the light rays of various color-lengths are focused to all fall directly on the sensor rather than some falling a little before and others a little beyond. The advantage (IMO) of this is to remove what is called chromatic aberration (and other aberrations) like those that cause the distracting purple fringing we see in images, which I feel detracts from the sharpness and our viewing in general.

Using APO-corrected lenses, which remove much or most aberrations gives us a sharp and color-corrected image. I find that uncorrected lenses (APO) that produce a lot of color-fringing distract me from the beauty of the image. It’s like the bad feng-shui of photo images. I go out of my way to avoid chromatic aberration (and others), thus my interest in APO lenses.

With that in mind, take a look through a few of the many thousands of photos I have, themselves taken from many hundreds of thousands of layers of photos I have taken.

For example, take this first photo, a simple stem of green leaves. This photo is mostly out of focus. You would have to look at the very tip of the top of this branch to see one tiny point in perfect focus. The rest has gone to bokeh, out-of-focus dissolve. What am I doing? Well, I'm testing a lens to see how well it performs wide open, which is where I get all that good out-of-focus blur – bokeh. I also like the effect of all this out-of-focus area punctuated with one point we can focus (and perhaps fixate) on. LOL.

FROM A DREAM

July 26, 2019

“I have gone to paint the sunrise in the sky,
To feel the cool of night warm into day.
The flowers from the ground call up to me,
The self I think I am is hard to see.”

The above poem came directly from a dream I had, which I then wrote down when I woke up. The rest of my poems I sometimes post here come from this dream of life I am having, from which I am still trying to wake-up from. LOL.

May years ago, decades in fact, I was first trying to learn to sit in meditation, probably from the late 1950s. Of course, I had no idea how to do it, although it was pretty straight-forward. You put some time aside and just sat. You would think it was as simple as that.

Of course, for me nothing is that simple. Back then, I felt self-conscious and too conspicuous sitting on a cushion in a corner doing what? I had no idea what, except I felt kind of foolish drawing attention to myself, doing something I did not know how to do. “Trailing clouds of...” questions did I come and was still more or less embarrassed as to just what I was doing or accomplishing.

Of course, all that changed over time, as I became more familiar with the accoutrements of dharma, even if I was still not more familiar with the mind itself. I wanted to get to know my mind, but simply did not know how. And I felt embarrassed to ask. Well, this went on for years, my trying to meditate on-and-off, but with meditation still being more or less an unknown for me. I became more serious in 1974 when Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche taught me to meditate. Those were instructions; I still had to learn how to use them.

And then later, many years later, after I had finally met my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who eventually became my Root Lama, I finally felt confident enough to formalize my practice a little. I believe the first sign of outward confidence was a little card with an image of the Buddha on it, I believe sent to me by Mark Rothe (who has

since become a dear friend), acting in behalf of the monastery that my teacher was abbot of. And somewhere along there, Rinpoche himself gave me a small statue (rupa) of Shakyamuni Buddha.

About all I could do with these was set them on a little shelf that was part of a bookcase and sit in front of it. And so it began, the collection of visible external signs of dharma practice, since there were yet (as far as I could tell) no internal signs of any realization. LOL.

And things, of course, ballooned from there, until I had a whole shelf of dharma items, then a room full, then a whole separate building full, and on and on. I became a magnet for dharma things and I liked each one very much. Did all these dharma items help my practice? That's hard to say. Certainly, they helped to the degree I had reverence for them and what they stood for. Perhaps that's about all I had, reverence for those objects and what they stood for. I certainly had no outward signs of realization.

And now, it seems, we have shrines of one kind or another all over the center. Although we have an external building filled with all kinds of thankas, rupas, pillows, and practice tables, not to mention various shrines, I tend to practice in my tiny office with a smaller shrine that is jam-packed with dharma stuff. I have another small shrine in the workroom where I often sleep. Do I need all these things? Probably not, but I have them nevertheless and find it hard to give away any of them, much less throw them away.

And I know that all these things are just pointers. I especially like the little silk prayer flags that have no printing on them. I tell folks these are for formless meditation. LOL.

TRUE WORDS

July 26, 2019

“I find that it is only,
At the very edge of sense,
Where words break down,
That they release,
Their essence,

And that's the truth.”

A little poem I put together years ago. I am a computer-system programmer; I've written a lot of computer code and for decades, so I know that the computer code is just another language and like all languages every word and syllable is nothing in itself, but only points beyond itself to somewhere else for any meaning.

And with written language like I'm writing here, these words too are just pointers. I have written many articles trying to explain what I am trying to explain here. And I have gone back and sought out your comments and your paraphrasing what I'm trying to say. And, I have to say that very few readers understand, which is just my failure to communicate what is incommunicable. And I can't believe it, because to me it seems so easy to understand. And the idea is:

In order to communicate, language depends on the sense it makes. And therefore, all language (without exception) has to make real sense or it is what we call nonsense and will not cohere. And all sense is, well, sensual, dependent on the five senses. Language has to point to an experience that we sense and feel. That's what meaning is. We could say that all language is a call to act, a call to action, much like what Baba Ram Das pointed out: “Be Here Now” – an experience.

Language only makes sense if we can make sense out of it, turn it into an experience. That's the whole point of language, IMO, to experience life, whatever that is. Working with some of the finest rinpoches there are and for many years at that, I find that they can only serve to guide us toward direct experience and, more important, to the realization of that experience and its true nature.

And so, I'm not going to stop trying to use language to communicate the dharma as well as I can, but we cannot expect (and don't you expect) to get anything out of words other than a direct plunge into experience, and that only if you are lucky. From that, realization may or may not result. The pith dharma teachings say (over and over) "From experience, realization may arise."

Yet, from my (probably small) amount of experience it takes what is called a "perfect storm" for all the necessary factors to conspire to ignite realization. Like flint striking steel, as an old boy scout, the flint has to strike the steel just so for there to be a spark. And from that spark, perhaps the fire of inspiration may result.

For that perfect storm to occur, IMO, we each have to find an authentic teacher, an authentic master of realization, what they call a "guru," to guide us or perhaps even to shake or jar us into popping out of the groove of distraction in which we have embedded ourselves all our lives.

This may sound like a hopeless task, like winning the lottery, yet it's not. However, it is a journey and path we personally must undertake, a journey that begins with turning away from our habit of fixation and distraction. The dharma provides just such a tool in what are called the Common Preliminaries, preliminary because they go before. These Common Preliminaries sound a little like fire & brimstone, yet that is because they are condensed and meant to be shared only to ears that can hear them.

The Common Preliminaries are also called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma, and, using a popular translation, they are:

(1) THIS PRECIOUS HUMAN BIRTH

This precious human birth,
So favorable for the practice of the dharma,
Is hard to obtain and easily lost.

At this time,
I must make this meaningful.

(2) IMPERMANENCE AND DEATH

The world and all its inhabitants are impermanent.
In particular,

The life of each being is like a water bubble.
It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse.
As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time,
I must practice now with diligence.

(3) KARMA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

At death there is no freedom,
And karma takes its course.
As I create my own karma,
I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action,
And always devote my time to wholesome action.
With this in mind,
I must observe my mind-stream each day.

(4) THE SHORTCOMINGS OF SAMSAARA

Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to my death,
The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara,
Cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings.
I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain
enlightenment.

There are more articles on “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind” here for those interested:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

THE TRAPPINGS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

July 27, 2019

[OK. Some folks want to see the other shrines around our dharma center, not that they are particularly fancy or ornate. And so, I include some pictures for those interested. Yet, I would like to say something about the trappings of Tibetan Buddhism and my thoughts on its future in America.

As I came up and learned the dharma, the trappings of Tibetan Buddhism were inescapable, if only because they gave me something to hang on to. This was intensified by the fact that my dharma teacher for the last 36 years had us do all our practices in Tibetan, not English.

When asked why this is so, Rinpoche explained that he did not know for certain that there were not special blessings that we needed that were connected to the original Tibetan texts themselves. And so, against that possibility, we were to do our practice in Tibetan. And we did, but it was not easy.

And we did this by reciting our texts in transliteration, sounding out the Tibetan, but not reading the Tibetan script. Later, I did learn to read Tibetan, but never became very good at translation without all kinds of dictionaries and what-not.

WAITING FOR AMERICAN DHARMA

As mentioned, my dharma teacher insisted that we each do our practice in Tibetan and not English, although that was very inconvenient for me personally and for Americans in general. Imagine! And it was a major shock (later on) when Rinpoche pointed out that we should not be waiting for better and better Tibetan teachers to arrive from Tibet or India, but had best prepare ourselves for the advent of American teachers that would present the dharma in our own tongue and approach, because that's what has to happen. At first, I found this a little unsettling, but when I thought about it, of course that is what happened in Tibet, where the dharma was brought from India.

Meanwhile, along the way, we should expect early adopters of the dharma in American to gradually be increasingly less Tibetan-culture oriented, and more American each year. Just as realization comes from inside, so ultimately the dharma entering a new country (as it is now in America) will be coming through Americans and not just Tibetans. They say it takes perhaps 300 years for dharma to enter a new country. Rinpoche made it clear that we Americans will have our own realized teachers who will write sadhanas and practices in English and tailor it for us and this land.

The Tibetan culture will gradually be shuffled off like a snake sheds its skin. American Dharma will be the order of the day, just as Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet was no longer Indian. Yes, some Sanskrit remnants remained in Tibetan Buddhism, like the mantras (or some slightly-altered form of them), but the whole idea of the dharma entering a new country like ours is for it to transform Americans so that we are enlightened and whatever we teach or write will be the dharma in American terms, not Tibetan.

Of course, right now we are practicing Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, not American Vajrayana Buddhism, but already there are signs that we are shedding the Tibetan trappings. The Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche saw that. American Buddhism is on its way and all of us interested will share in that transformation.

I fell in love with the aesthetics of Zen in the late 1950s, early on in my dharma interest, but found my teacher in Tibetan Buddhism and its culture. At this point, I dearly love the Tibetan culture, yet, I am not THAT attached to it or so I tell myself. LOL. I'm looking for American Siddhas and Mahasiddhas to come down the pike. Sooner or later they will come.

HEART CENTER KTC/KKSG SHRINES

Some of you may want to see the rest of the shrines around our dharma center ("Heart Center KTC/KKSG"), not that there are that many. And these are not fancy shrines, yet they have grown over the years. So here they are, all in one photo-album. I will include my office-room shine in here too, but place that last since I just posted it.

It might help to understand that our center (and shrine) is dedicated to Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of the setting sun and the direction west among the five Dhyana Buddha families. We also have a great affinity to the Mahasiddha Tilopa at our center.

TIME TO MIND

July 27, 2019

Lost again in the swing of time,
I agree to forget,
What I find so hard to remember:
This moment.

Always later,
Urged awake by impermanence,
I am back again,
But farther down the road.

Time takes my mind,
In small and larger bites.

The little ones,
I reconnect and can remember,
But the larger gaps,
I can only leap across,
Guess at,
And hopefully learn,
To say more in silence,
Than in words.

[A poem written some time ago. I am busy learning patience.
Not much more to say. I am OK in that. Best wishes to
everyone.]

PRACTICE A HABIT

July 28, 2019

“Meditation,
While not practice,
Is a habit,
That can be practiced.

Practice builds habits,
But should not itself,
Become a habit.

In other words:

Practice,
To form a habit,
But don't make,
A habit of it."

Another poem I wrote years ago that discriminates actual meditation from practicing to learn to meditate. I write poems to record and store thoughts in a concise form. Hopefully, it is obvious enough.

All it says is that we should not confuse "meditation" from practicing to learn meditation. They are two different things. We practice, like scaffolding, to help shape our eventual meditation, but that "effort" or scaffolding has to be removed when we actually are able to meditate. It should fall away like a booster rocket from a space probe. The final part simply says that we should not make a habit of practicing meditation. We should just meditate.

“I SAW THE LIGHT, I SAW THE LIGHT”

July 30, 2019

[My inspiration to write is a little more intermittent lately because I am thinking less and experiencing more, and eventually realizing something. So, I actually have something to say again from better realizing what I have been through, instead of just treading water. You’ve all heard it before, but the importance of it continues to impress me. I would appreciate those of you who are practiced dharma students giving me your thoughts on what I write here. I am kind of out on a limb and would like some feedback.]

I am interested in the various kinds of light. Of course, as a photographer, there is the physical light, but here let’s talk about “spiritual light,” whatever that is. As a performing musician, way back in the day (as they say), I used to like to perform a lot of Hank Williams songs, including his hit “I Saw the Light.” Just what kind of light was that?

In the dharma, the Zen Buddhists have kind of laid claim to the kind of spiritual realization signified by the “Aha!” exclamation. That would be a major realization, but there are probably innumerable smaller realizations along the journey to enlightenment, once we have had that initial “Aha!, which the Rinzai Zen folks call “Kensho” and the Vajrayana Tibetans call “Recognition.” In either case, it is recognition of the true or actual nature of the mind and how it works. “Recognition” or “Kensho” is not any sort of enlightenment or the end of the dharma path, but rather marks the beginning of actual realization for the practitioner.

The kind of spiritual “light” I am focusing on in this article is not so much any of the above forms, but rather what might be called the “Spiritual Sun” itself, which in dharma terms is sometimes called “Vivid Awareness.” It is my contention here that this same Vivid Awareness is the sheer mass of spiritual insight that those of us in Samsara so carefully avoid looking at.

“Samsara” is a dharma term for this cyclic world of ups and downs that we, so the texts say, endlessly circle in. And so,

when we say, "I saw the Light," the truth is probably: not so much. I say this because I have had the not-so-welcome opportunity by way of two strokes to experience the mind stripped of all its cultural attaches, meaning the Self and its entire entertainment troupe. And this was an eye-opener for me, literally a shock to the system.

The upshot of this shock is I realized that for the most part I very much live (and probably you do too) in the twilight zone, a very dim area of time that is about as far away from what could be called a Spiritual Light as possible. We are literally clothed in our attachments, fixations, and everything "entertainment" to the eclipse of this spiritual sun as much as possible, almost a total eclipse. This is the theme here.

Just as we can't stand to look directly into the midday sun, so is it true that we cannot (and thus don't) look into the spiritual sun, this Vivid Awareness that lights up all of the life that we live. I feel I must emphasize and double-down on this point: i.e. that we don't even begin to look directly at our innate Awareness and have never (not even ever) done so.

I'm sorry to kind of strong-arm you here, but IMO this is a crucial point. I never had looked at this Awareness until my major stroke. Even initial breakthroughs like Kensho or Recognition, as powerful as they are, as I understand it, threshold events. They are like a dharma "ante-in" as to how the mind works and how we each might work it. Yet, at least IMO, even with this realization we are still very much using this innate Awareness to light the way rather than to directly look at it fully in its own right.

After Kensho or Recognition, we are very much still in Samsara. The difference is that, as the Christians use to say, "We are in the world, but no longer of the world," if you can make sense out of that. I can. "Recognition" gives the dharma practitioner the tools and confidence they need to know how to reach enlightenment, but it is not enlightenment itself. The road to enlightenment still must be travelled every step of the way.

And it is my guess, and perhaps nothing more, that the road and journey toward enlightenment very much involves what I am trying to describe here, that our intrinsic Awareness is like

the midday Sun, something we have never seen and don't know how to look directly at.

It is my belief and also a direct experience (thanks to my second stroke) that we have little to no idea how much we are wrapped up in Samsara and devoted to it. I say this because, due to my stroke, I was instantly stripped of all my attachments, fixations, and the circus of entertainment that I habitually bathed in. Gone in an instant! What or who was left?

I had experienced glimmers of such a state when faced with the death of a loved one or any serious life shock, but I had never known complete separation from all of my entertainment, much less from the "Me, Myself, and I" component. Then, I did.

And it was devastating and hugely embarrassing to see for myself that up to that point I had largely wallowed in all these entertainment trappings to the exclusion of just about any direct insight (or even a glimpse) into the Vivid Awareness (that we all share) that is as obvious as the Sun in a totally clear sky.

I have to say that, after that stroke, I scurried like a rat looking for a dark place to hide, anything but endure what remained when all my fixations and entertainment was gone, although this same Vivid Awareness was what I had read about, studied, longed for, through all my dharma practice for many decades. LOL. It's ironic.

Yet, gone it was and what remained was like a giant sun in the middle of a desert and no water to be found, the water being any way for me to entertain myself anymore. It's not like I could go and dig out or reconnect with my entertainment-console. Instead, it was completely gone and it took months to re-grow a new set of attachments. I was just out there dangling in the winds of change.

About all I could at first do is stay busy, keep my head down, work real hard, and try NOT to look at that blinding Awareness in my mind. It hurt too much to look directly at it and I was used to the twilight and the darkness, but any shadow was nowhere to be found. And you know I looked!

And so, I got a lot of busy-work done and did my best to ignore the Awareness that was staring me in the face, just as I had my entire life up to that point. There is humor here, but it took a little distance from the event for me to find it. And some humor I very much needed.

The upshot of all this (and why I am writing this again and again) is that I was astonished (ASTONISHED!) to find that in fact I was a creature of the night my entire life up to the time of that second stroke. And I could not believe that I could not stand to look Awareness in the eye, but instead tried to ignore it as much as I could, although I was totally (and perpetually) in its presence. It was like being stripped naked of every comfort and forced to stand out in public in my own presence. It's not logical.

And so, having no where to run or hide, I just had to take it (endure it) straight, with no reprieve, day after day, month after month. And trying to get my mind around all this was not easy. It took me real time to realize that what I was enduring and wanted to hide from was this same Vivid Awareness that I had fantasized and glorified all these years. There is no other exclamation I could find.

The difficulty with dharma training and practice is not with all of the stuff I had waded through or had read about in the practice commentaries. Or, all of the practice I had religiously done. That was the least of it. The elephant in the room was my own ignorance and my systematic ignoring of this innate Awareness. It really is like not being able to stare directly at the Sun at midday. Try as I might, I could not induce myself to voluntarily look directly at my own innate Awareness. Think about it my fellow dharma folks.

Through many decades and dharma practices, I had always imagined I was doing my best to realize my own innate Awareness, but just could not quite make it out, not quite realize it. Then, to find out that all the sincerity and effort of dharma practice were basically some kind of smokescreen and that all this time I have done everything in my power to ignore the very thing that I sought was, well, mind-boggling.

Of course, this has (IMO) implications for traversing the bardo. If I can't stand the light of the mind, my own innate

Awareness right here and now, how will I be able to look at the light of the mind in the bardo?

And I want you to see my point and comment if you can. Beyond all the years of dharma study and practice, replete with any visions and goals, was something as simple and stubborn as my own habitual ignorance of my native Awareness, the same awareness that each of you reading this has. Can you see it?

As well-oiled as my dharma practice was and sincere as I could be, I had never managed to even address something as simple as my own ignorance of this same Awareness that I sought. It's not like it was ever very far from the immediacy it is, like right there in front of me. It is humbling to realize that despite any sophistication I might have, I had never scratched the surface of my own habitual ignorance.

This is humbling, but I'm very grateful to be aware of it. Now, as they say, I see the problem. Now, let's see if I can do something about it. I'm working on it. However, this is very different from anything I have done up to now that is dharma-related.

THE INVISIBLE AWARENESS

July 31, 2019

[If you want to discuss the content of this post with me, please do. I very much welcome that. That's why I post them. However, if you use this post to present other topics or material, please do that on your own blog. Thanks.]

I may not be a bronc rider like John Travolta in "Urban Cowboy," but I am doing my best to ride out the storm that my own inner life sends me rather than react and start the whole cycle over again. Patience is a term I understand and have been working on my whole life.

It's hard enough to read the legitimate signs that life shows me as how to correct my course. However, running from my knee-jerk reactions, endlessly dodging this way and that, only finds me going in circles. I love the old Christian slogan "Go to meet your maker." I would rather face the music than escape reality one more time. I have never forgotten the line in a poem the artist Michelangelo wrote "What if a little bird should escape death for many a long year, only to suffer a crueler death."

I would rather turn and face my maker directly if I can figure out how, so to speak. When the winds of change blow, when they howl through the halls of my mind as they sometimes do and I try to hang on, outsmarting or avoiding them is not a real solution, but just another dodge.

I learned from my still-recent-enough stroke that the brilliant light of the mind (that light we all have) found me standing naked in what appeared to me at the time as a desert created out of my own lack of entertainment. And the right move was not to shield my face and then race for the shadows, but to soldier-up and learn to endure (and hopefully love) the light, just as it is. Is this what awaits us in the bardo?

It's the light we never see but one that is always on. We watch the movie, but never notice the stage lights that make the movie possible. It's as plain as the nose on our face, which also we never see directly, but only in our reflections.

And so, the language of this blog tries to express the inexpressible. We can but point at what defies direct looking at, yet nevertheless, it's right there. The inner light that lights up our life has never been seen because we are too busy shining it like a flashlight and have never thought to look at it directly. We use it but don't know it directly.

And when we do look, we are blinded by the light because we are not used to it. It's like looking directly at the Sun.

Considering we never have seen our own vivid awareness, although we use it to see-by every single day, perhaps you can see the difference between seeing with the aid of our awareness and looking directly at it. The dharma looks directly at it.

I guess my own question is what are we thinking? That our native vivid awareness is going to be like one of those little bedtime reading lights? Or that such awareness is a concept out of a dharma book?

On the contrary, it's more like one of those huge stage lights that they wheel around on movie sets. Mix that with the fact that we are blind as a bat when at last we encounter our own innate awareness directly and you have the picture. We are blinded by the light of our own awareness when first seen directly.

It takes time and practice to endure the direct light of the mind, acclimatize to it, and let our eyes get used to its brightness. My fear is that too many dharma practitioners (I was one) think of developing greater awareness is a get-out-of-jail card, when it is not. Greater awareness is not something we get or somehow add-on, but rather something we recognize is already there and part of us. And here is the hard part.

We imagine that awareness will be like the dewdrop that slips into the shining sea, effortlessly. My own experience may be unique to only me, but I sincerely doubt it. Being able to stop ignoring our innate awareness and be able to endure and accept it is a complete ordeal in its own right, one that requires changing the deeply ingrained habit of ignoring the brilliant light of our own Awareness. It's not a free-be, but a

hard-won realization on our part. That is what I would have you consider.

Does anyone know what I am talking about?

THE MIDNIGHT SUN

August 1, 2019

[Photo of the stupa at our center here in Big Rapids. This is the third article on this particular theme or point, that of the Brilliant Awareness that makes life possible for us, just as the Sun does for our physical life. If you know this vivid Awareness and can look at it, why not talk about it with me. If you don't, why not talk about it with me.]

This metaphor of vivid awareness as a bright light in the mind's sky, like a Sun, is just that, a figure of speech. What does it point to?

That "bright light" is what we turn away from when we fixate on our attachments and we do this ALL the time. That's a backward way of saying what I'm trying to say. It's like we have night and day reversed. We immerse ourselves in our attachments and fixations as if they were the light of our life, when the true light of the mind is shining while we look everywhere else but at it. That ignorance on our part adds up, probably lifetime after lifetime.

Of course, it's not a visible light, this vivid awareness that lights up our life. In fact, we probably have never even seen the light of the mind because it is entirely obscured by our fixations and attachments, not to mention that we never look at it. We see to that. LOL.

Early-on, I caught glimpses of the mind's light only when something really untoward and shocking arose in my life, like a friend's death or some great loss. In fact, any time that my Self has been shattered and vacated, however temporarily, it leaves me walking in the void unmoved by my otherwise endless entertainment and diversions. They all go void and don't interest me. If you know what I'm talking about here, you have a taste. Those were glimpses of emptiness that I eventually came to value, a chance to look around without being fixated on my attachments.

It was my recent stroke that completely wiped out all my attachments and fixations, and for a very long time. Having no diversions, no entertainment, and no sense of Self left me

with no alternative but to endure what remained when all my Self and its entertainment was stripped away.

It was very, very (and very) uncomfortable, to say the least. I had no choice and no alternative to begin to come to grips with my own innate awareness because there it was. It was all that was left, after “Me, Myself, and I” checked out.

I don’t know where to begin as to describing what we could call here the “inner light” or the innate Awareness within us that has always been there. I can say that I had never seen it before or even come close. In short, I had no idea it existed even though it was shining in my face and blinding me all this time. How often do we look directly at the Sun?

And this, despite decades of dharma practice with a very different idea of awareness in mind. Both are true, but this mysterious midnight-Sun is something we have never seen because we habitually always ignore it. Always.

And it was not pleasant, but harsh beyond words. I couldn’t stand not to have my old entertainment surrounding me. However, all of that and my fixations, attachments, etc. were just completely gone, wiped out. No amount of dharma practice could have done a better job.

And I don’t mean gone for a day or part of a day, but for weeks and weeks on end. I worked like the devil to avoid acknowledging this inner Awareness, immersed myself in every kind of task, just so I would not have be alone with myself in the sheer nakedness of that Awareness. For me, it was just too painful to endure. What will we do in the bardo if we have not become familiar with this hidden awareness? They say that the Tibetan word for meditation is Gom, which means to become familiar with. Try becoming familiar with the Awareness that we have habitually ignored. In my experience, it is NOT a walk in the park.

In other words, this Awareness is not just some bright light that, like the Sun in the sky, we can put on some dark glasses to look through at it. We have been there and done that. All those analogies or whatever we can call them are just misleading. I’m talking of not being able to stand this inner light because it is just too painful to even begin to look at. Is

that just the stroke talking or is that the reality we all face?
You tell me.

By too painful, I mean I could not even look at it to see what is there or to see what I had never seen. I couldn't move an inch to raise my gaze because my head had been downturned all my life in ignoring just that, especially that. I didn't know what was there or even that there was anything like that there. All I wanted was to find something to entertain myself with, something to busily be doing so that I was immersed in the darkness of my own shadowy ignorance and could get some relief from the light. I was blind as a bat in that light.

Gradually, I have found things to do, ways of keeping busy, ways that avoid that great awareness waiting for me when I remove my obscurations. I guess I have always thought that the awareness of dharma was like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks we played as kids. You took stick after stick away from the pile until there was nothing left. The idea is that, like the onion, there is nothing at all beneath all those layers. However, that's just half the story and the easy half at that. It's all the dharma most folks know. Yet, there is more.

The reality was not just me stripping myself of my attachments until I'm like an empty vessel. There is no vessel to be emptied. That's a convenient fiction, IMO. The container and the contained are one and the same.

Yes, we must divest ourselves of our attachments and fixations. However, we must also empty ourselves of our ignorance, of our age-old habit of ignoring being aware. Instead, we each have to turn toward the light and be the moth to the flame until, phoenix-like, we rise from the ashes of our fixations. That I found to be difficult and most very painful.

And that funeral pyre that must first burn so that we can see the light of the mind is no small thing. Such a consummation is a two-edged sword that cuts both ways. I wrote this poem many years ago.

PHOENIX

Personality,
Bright beauty of the night,
That terrible crystal,

Burning in the darkness,
At the very edge of time.

Watching,
In rapt fascination,
Fires,
Impossible to ignore,
Forever frozen,
On the face of age.

It is a dark light,
Indeed,
These funeral pyres,
Signifying nothing,
But impermanence.

This is a fire,
That does not warm.

“THE BIGGER THE FRONT, THE BIGGER THE BACK”

August 2, 2019

That’s an old Macrobiotic saying, and I was trained in macrobiotic cooking back in the 1960s and early 1970s. Our Michigan basement was filled with wooden kegs from Japan of various misos, tamari, and ume plum, not to mention the bran pickles and what-not. We made our own tofu back then, pounded sweet rice to make mochi, and so on. In fact, I designed the logo for Eden Foods and, as an astrologer, was asked to pick a date when they first opened, which I of course did. That was in 1969.

The photo shown here is not one of some baby diapers gone bad, but seaweeds from the East Coast being dried in the side yard of our house in Ann Arbor in the early 1970s. I am slowly getting to the theme for this article, which is examining the term “busy.” I’ve been busy in this life. I wonder what the downside of busy is and what that means. And the title for this blog gives it away.

I’ve always thought being busy was “good” and I’m not saying it isn’t as I write this. I am saying that being busy, by definition, means I miss out on “not-being-busy” and the implications that go along with that choice. I could simply say that I don’t like to be bored; I’d rather be busy.

However, does the specter of boredom (and its avoidance) hide other possible benefits. Walk with me a bit here, as I lay out some thoughts that I have had on this topic. Let me begin with my busyness

Since I was just a kid, I studied nature and collected all of it I could. I won’t say how many butterflies I killed and collected out of love, but the very thought of the karma involved terrifies me. Ditto for amphibians and reptiles. At one time, after being sent out on a collecting trip for the University of Michigan through Texas and the south, they told me (if I remember right) that I contributed the largest skeletal collection they had ever received. Unthinkable.

As I look back on my life, the degree and sheer amount of tedium I worked in (and thrived on) is almost unique. Just to name a few projects, so that you know I'm world-class when it comes to the tedious (LOL):

My collection of astrological books and magazines has been said to be the largest ever assembled. Today it is part of the permanent collection of the University of Illinois library. It took a full-sized Allied Van Lines truck and a UPS-sized truck to haul the collection (and my personal papers and correspondence) away from the library I had put together and curated.

My collection of music data (AllMusic.com) was (and still is) the largest database on the planet of music-related data, every album from 10-inch records on up, with songs, sideman, discographies, biographies, tracks, songwriters, etc. Nothing could be more tedious than documenting hundreds and hundreds of thousands of albums and singles. I did it myself and then later with a staff of 150 full-time people and 700 free-lance writers.

In addition, my collection of physical music CDs is now a part of the permanent collection of Michigan State University. They number 720,000 CDs.

My collection of movie data (Allmovie.com) is one of the two largest databases of film and music in existence, every movie, cast, and character. It is available online now.

My collection of rock n' roll concert posters is also the largest ever assembled and I did this pretty much all alone, some 33,000 original music concert posters, each photographed by me, measured, and organized. That database is now in the permanent collection of the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, also a copy is part of the non-profit Haight Street Art Center in San Francisco, and then also the database for ClassicPosters.com, a website specializing in rock concert posters.

I also had a large collection (thousands) of audio recordings of Kagyu dharma teachers which I maintained as a backup for what was stored at our monastery, which I am told is on its way to Tibet for some reason. They all have been digitized.

This is not to mention that I have a collection of many hundreds of thousands of nature photographs, all of which I have personally taken.

Anyway, you get the idea. I am not afraid of the tedious and am perhaps a little bit expert in placing one foot in front of the other and persisting in completing projects. And, so what is all of this leading up to?

Through all of the above work, I had to keep my head down and sacrifice other things I might have done in a day in favor of moving forward with these projects. Perhaps, another way to say this is that I most perfectly avoided (you could almost say ignored) anything but whatever I was busy on. I had to. In other words, I am no stranger to tedium.

And it was only recently, after my second stroke, that I realized how dependent I was on sticking my head in the sand of busyness and ignoring everything else. In other words, I had another thought coming and that thought came in the aftermath of my recent stroke. Consider that the stroke completely removed (and for quite some time) anything whatsoever that I could entertain myself with. Me, an expert in entertaining myself with whatever I was doing (even if it was as an archivist of popular culture) suddenly was forced out of my busyness and into the vivid awareness of the naked mind. I went cold turkey in an instant and was frozen out there in the world of pure non-entertainment, up that creek without a paddle, so to speak.

And so, there you have the reason for the maxim “The Bigger the Front, the Bigger the Back” used here. Thanks to the stroke, I found myself in this world I live in, stripped of all entertainment and without the Self I had come to consider as “me, myself, and I.” And this in the flash of an instant. Bam!

So, it’s no surprise that I found myself blinded by all that was left for me to reside in, which is the naked awareness of the mind itself without the entourage of my habits and entertainment; this was essentially a singularity. There was nothing else there except the present moment and this overpowering presence of this Awareness that confronted, blinded me, and which I could not but try to turn away from.

We are using here the word “light” and “awareness” to describe a state of mind, so don’t get too attached to those words and that description. When I say vivid or stark awareness, I mean that whatever it was, it was too “bright” or difficult for me to look directly at it. So, instead of “light,” think of a singularity so stark that I had to turn away from it at all times. There was no relief or entertainment.

And, I had, at least for some time, no hooks to the past, no available memories, no nostalgia, and no way to dive (like Uncle Scrooge McDuck in his money bin) in the distraction of the entertainments that I was used to. Nada. I felt like a sore thumb sticking out in a desert of too-bright light or starkness. I could not help but turn away from this stark light of naked Awareness. I wonder how many people are aware of this starkness at all?

We have umpteen books on dharma awareness with the suggestion (as far as I can tell) that when we have dharma realization, it will become like the old line, “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” What if the dewdrop does not slip so easily into the shining sea? That’s what I am finding out as true. It is not always that easy.

There are many dharma purification practices (The Preliminaries) through which we can purify ourselves of our fixations and attachments. However, unless we are just playing with semantics, does that mean we will just then slip into the shining sea or like the sun comes up, become aware smoothly and gradually?

Or, do we have to purify ourselves on the one hand and then also stop ignoring the light of our own awareness? Do the purification practices gradually expose us to the light of our own ignorance? It’s not that I have not done a fair amount of purification practices. I have done two Ngöndros and lots of other practices, Lojong practice, deity practices, etc.

That being said, none of that had prepared me for the shock of being blinded by the sheer brilliance of the Awareness that confronted me when I was stripped of all of my shadowy attachments and entertainment.

Instead of thinking of the Awareness like a brilliant light, imagine it as something to turn away from because it was too

stark and painful to look toward. We can see by the light of this awareness into the shadows of our life, yet we have never turned and looked directly into this vivid awareness. Why? Because, it is blinding.

I am trying to figure all this out, and I have now had (via the stroke) some graphic forewarning about my own ignorance and the price we can pay for immersing ourselves in attachments at the expense of giving up our ignorance and all of its entertainments. I had better stop ignoring and begin to become more familiar with the nature of this brilliant awareness. This is not a case of “when I get around to it...,” but rather one of: I better get with the program on this.

RED FOX IN THE MORNING

August 3, 2019

[I had another MRI today, this time for the blood vessels in my brain and you know how I hate to go to the hospital and change into hospital gowns (complete with little booties) and walk or get wheeled around. I have another hospital visit this coming Monday. I have a heart condition that can't be operated on, so my life depends on my diet and especially exercise. Here are some remarks about my favorite form of exercise: walking.]

I like to walk and I walk early in the morning. Also, my doctors say, as mentioned, that I have to exercise. I don't walk at a certain time, but more at a certain temperature, like 63-degrees or so, cooler if the sun is out. And I live in Michigan, which was scraped flat as a pancake by a glacier eons ago; so it takes a lot of walking to get the heart moving. Luckily, we have one cemetery about a third of a mile from where we live, and it has hills!

And in that cemetery, we walk what I call the "Four Elements," four-quite steep hills that amount to a bit of a workout. As mentioned, I have named these four hills Fire, Water, Air, and Earth after the four astrological elements. If I walk early enough, quite often I will see a red fox (sometimes two) in the cemetery. It's funny, but I never see a fox going away from me or coming toward me. The fox always seem to be somewhere on the horizon, cutting across my vision at an oblique angle. They must be coming home from a night out and always are going quite fast with their tail stretched out behind them and their nose pointing straight ahead. I see them before they see me; otherwise, I'm sure I would never see them at all.

Our town, Big Rapids, Michigan sits on the edge of 900,000 acres of the Manistee National Forest, so some wilderness is never far away. It's great except during hunting season, when hunters from all over flock to our town. We don't walk outside of town during hunting season.

When everything is equal, Margaret and I walk the Four Elements together. If she is busy, I walk it by myself, but it never is as much fun walking alone. I wear one of those watches that keep track of everything, in particular how fast my heart is beating. It is amazing how that heartrate varies from day to day. This watch can also summon help, receive email, FB posts, and even produce an EKG right on the spot and send it to my stroke doctor. Some days I'm as crisp as the cold air around me, while on others (if it is too warm), I kind of have to drag myself through those four hills step by step.

A few times a year, there is early morning fog that carpets the cemetery. The sunlight on the fog particles create a phantasmagoria that's like walking through a dream or like when we climbed through clouds in Tibet. And some days, when I have little energy, I don't walk the hills, but instead walk the flatlands through the neighborhoods. We call it "walking the square," which can take us through the county fairground, where we can stop and see the horses. That flatland route sees to it that our shoes are soaked from cutting through the wet grass to get on the fairgrounds.

When fall turns to winter and the local cemetery becomes too snowy or slippery for walking, I walk next door to our dharma center and use the elliptical trainer. I have one of my old laptops set up there and usually listen to extensive dharma teachings either on CD/DVD or on YouTube. I do about 30 minutes a day and have covered a number of 10-day dharma teachings that way, a little at a time. It's a great way to listen to dharma teachings.

So, there you have some notes on exercise as I do it. Margaret is traveling for a while, so tomorrow I will walk the cemetery by myself if I don't chicken out. I'm not crazy about walking alone.

LIVING BY MY WITS

August 3, 2019

[I warn you that this is a bit of a ramble, since I am bucking my routine (what I am supposed to be doing) and more-or-less free floating for the day.]

As for living by wits, that would be me as a young person, finding my way along the fringe of society, having been denied the easier access attained by following the rules. I never finished high school and instead set out to live in the world. School never interested me; learning did. I could not help but choose to be an outrider because, like a shaman, I fell through the cracks of conventionality early-on. I don't remember making that decision, because I was too young to know anything else but my own inner sense of direction. Perhaps this is the fate of the oldest child. I was the oldest of five boys.

Before I knew it, I had inner experiences that defied society's ability to understand them and that did not endear me at all (or vice-versa). In what I call my "Shakespeare Period," back in the 1960s, I remember writing this poem:

"Ah!

Who could let such a bargain pass,
As this poor century will allow.
On coming in, I'm asked to leave,
And when asked to leave, I bow."

There was one time in the spring of 1967, when my mind had all its stops pulled out and I wandered around the University of Michigan campus, daring to walk right into the offices of professors that interested me and ask to sit down and talk with them. I was not a student. Some were shocked that I could be so bold as to ask for their presence, to be there, while others were glad to see me. Perhaps I was a breath of fresh air to some.

I remember the famous economist Kenneth Boulding, who welcomed me into his office and we sat around, read poems to each other, and shed tears together about life. Another time, I took the train to Chicago, just to see my favorite

interpreter of religious experiences at the time, Mircea Eliade. This was before Tibetan Buddhists appeared in my life. As it turned out, Eliade was not there that day, so I sat with Hannah Arendt, the German-American philosopher, who assured me I was not a budding Plato. LOL. Another time, I did talk with Eliade on the phone. I read almost everything Eliade wrote (including his novels) and appreciated him very much

And I used to go up on North Campus to the music school where there were dozens of open practice rooms and I would play a nice upright piano in a tiny room, composing music from my heart. I remember, someone in charge rapping on the door, opening it, and telling me I must leave, because “people there had work to do.” I was saddened by that, but I probably was playing music that was, well, very free. I was free.

And late at night I would sometimes go to (I believe it was) the Campus Chapel which was open all night. No one was ever there. I would play the church organ and fill the church with what was for me the sound of wonderful music. Or, go into their basement and play a piano that was in tune. Yet, I should remind readers that I am one who when having an MRI, asks for no music, so that I could better hear the tones of the MRI machine, which are like music to me. I did that yesterday.

Of course, one of my housemates (aside from our drummer, a young Iggy Pop) was the avant-garde classical composer Robert Sheff (AKA “Blue” Gene Tyranny” who was the keyboard player in our blues band for years. Robert could sight-read an entire orchestra score.

Thanks to Robert, I was exposed to the advent of “Once Music” in Ann Arbor, with avant-garde composers like John Cage, Robert Ashley, George Cacioppo, Gordon Mumma, Roger Reynolds, Philip Krumm, and Donald Scavarda. These composers, and others, gathered in Ann Arbor and put on “happenings” or events like the one held on the roof of Ann Arbor’s Thompson Street parking garage. Artists for that event included John Cage, Eric Dolphy, Morton Feldman, Lukas Foss, David Tutor, and others. Michael Erlewine was also at the event. LOL.

I will barely mention that I am the author (or editor) of a dozen or more printed books on music, not to mention compiler of servers full of music data. I like good music of any genre, even elevator music and late-night crooners. LOL.

And, while I'm talking about my bandmate Robert Sheff, from down memory-lane comes the release of an album this fall from my old group the Prime Movers Blues Band (from 1965-1970s) on Sundazed Records (an independent record label who specializes in rare recordings from the 1950s-1970s). I was the lead singer and amplified harmonica player, not to mention, manager, leader, poster maker, and chief cook and bottle washer. This album has the few recordings that came out of a basement some years ago, which will be released I believe in November 2019. Here are some photos from that period for your entertainment. Also, some sounds from the Prime Movers Blues Band.

"Friends of the Sixties: Prime Movers Blues Band."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZ05bsagUqY&t=557s>

THE BAD ABOUT BUSY

August 4, 2019

[Well, so much for a day off from whatever I usually do. I'm back on track today and still puzzling out the aftermath of my stroke and the realizations that are still coming out of that. I'm thinking about how busy I have been and is that good or bad?]

I've been busy all my life. Yet, its only lately that I began to have an alternate take on "busy." This blog is about that.

If you are a "busy" person and like to keep busy and yet, at times (when you are not busy) find yourself at a loss as to what to do, and feel uncomfortable without something to busy yourself with, THEN you may be able to get a whiff of what I am pointing at here, which is: that unless we are busy or entertaining ourselves, some of us (not everyone) are uncomfortable being alone in the simple (but stark) presence of the "light" of our own awareness. LOL. That's the idea here.

No, we are not going to see a bright-light physically, but we are going to sense our un-comfort when we run out of energy to keep busy, don't know what to do next, and are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with just being alone without some busyness to hide in. Try that scenario on for size, because that is the type of situation I have been talking about here.

Over and over, the Tibetans tell us that meditation is "becoming familiar with our own mind." To the degree we are uncomfortable in our own presence, that is a sure sign that we are unfamiliar with our mind. That "uncomfortableness" is a sign of wanting to ignore our innate awareness rather than rest or relax in (or on top of) the awareness itself. We can become aware of all this and start to become familiar with our mind when we are not making-busy all the time. A lot of busyness is just a dodge and a way to ignore our own innate Awareness. I should walk that back a bit and say: we best not become attached to our busyness as a place to hide from reality.

I will grant that I may well be a worst case because I have been very busy much of my life and, in my busyness, I managed to get a lot done. Yet, one thing I did not get done is to become familiar-enough and fully comfortable with the nature of my own awareness. Perhaps, I skimmed some of the awareness off the top, but still most of my attention was on what I was busy with and not resting on the Awareness itself. I have so confusion there.

Instead, as mentioned many times here, I would rather keep busy, either actually doing something or otherwise making progress with this and that. In a way, I did my best to close any gaps that emerged from not being busy, if only not to waste time, but I must acknowledge I probably tried to ignore the obvious vivid awareness that is right here and now. That's what I'm pondering here.

And so, when the major stroke occurred and all my entertainment went out the window and could not be called up no matter how I tried, that's when I was exposed to whatever we want to call it, our innate awareness, our ordinary mind, or just being alone with ourselves to the exclusion of complete immersion in some form of entertainment or even useful busyness. I grounded that innate light like a lightning-rod in the shadows and never looked up.

There is a real difference between being busy getting things done and make-busyness just to avoid feeling alone with our own awareness. I mostly got things done (and still do), yet when all fixation, attachment, and entertainment was suddenly removed from my menu, the stark awareness that I was subjected to was overwhelming. I could barely stand it, yet I suddenly had no place to hide in the dark, and that includes busyness. All in a moment, it was all light all of the time and I could not even endure it, much less appreciate it.

Until then, I had no idea and no way of knowing how attached I was to busyness and entertaining myself. Now I do plan to do something about it. Attachment to entertainment is such an ingrained habit that it's a deep hole to climb out of and I am just now (for the first time ever) seeing the problem.

I want to get to know whatever I have been avoiding and ignoring all my life. At the same time, doing meaningful tasks,

being busy, is fine as long as it is just not an escape. My root guru is almost always busy, sewing robes and whatever, filling statues, studying, teaching, and, of course, working with the thousands of students he has. And so, it's not being busy that is the problem; it's being attached to the busyness at the expense of our own innate awareness that's the problem.

There's the rub.

P.S. In my own defense, my busyness was not just conceptual; I deep dived into whatever I was interested in, so it was not a complete waste of time. I was immersed in what I did; the only problem is that by my busyness, I failed to become familiar enough with the innate Awareness that makes everything possible.

I have perhaps one more thing I would like to point out, perhaps tomorrow.

THE STORY ABOUT THREE-YEAR RETREAT

August 5, 2019

Margaret and I are slowly getting ready for our yearly trek to KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) monastery in the mountain above Woodstock, New York to attend the 10-day Mahamudra intensive taught by our teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. This will be the 31st year in a row and we have been to each one. We have driven to this teaching enough miles to circle the equator of the earth almost three times. LOL.

I am reminded that extended teachings like these, themselves, are precious mandalas. Mandalas are offerings. We have all seen photos of the elaborate sand mandalas that the Tibetans create and then sweep into a river when they are completed. Why destroy such a lovely creation? I guess it is that impermanence dictates that all “things” created in this world must end, with their components scattered to the four elements. Mandalas are no different, and many do not understand what the actual mandala is.

The key part of the elaborate sand mandalas is not the colored sand that is gathered up and thrown into the water. Dust to dust... or sand to sand. No, the mandala is the act of offering the mandala itself, the process of creation and not so much what is created. The mandala is the concentration, intent, life, prayers, and mantras we pour into the creation of the mandala, not just the resulting sand image which is destroyed just as we each will die. In each case, it is the process of offering itself that is the result. And, as mentioned, this holds true for gatherings like these 10-day teaching as well. The offering itself, these precious teachings, in which we all share, unlike the sand, is not destroyed, but is dedicated to the eventual enlightenment of ourselves and all sentient beings.

I remember one previous teaching, as it came to an end and all of the participants, my fellow dharma practitioners, began to file out and head for home. Margaret and I stayed for an extra day, so we were just hanging around.

Later that day, as I sat in the daily Mahakala puja, a practice offered to the fierce dharmapalas (the protectors of the dharma), the sky just opened and it poured rain. In Tibetan teachings, it is considered auspicious if it rains during the teachings or at the end. Well, indeed these whole ten days had been auspicious. Many of the most senior students present said that this teaching was the most profound and glorious they had ever attended. I felt the same way. This was something we will be talking about for years to come, as I say, like the finale at the fireworks.

And these recollections remind me of an important event in my life that occurred at the very first 10-day teaching, back in 1989. I have told this story before only to a few, but I am getting old and there is no reason it has to be a secret other than vanity. Anyway, as it turns out some of my FB friends right here are my dearest friends, at least those I interact with the most.

This event happened at the end of the first ten-day teaching in 1989, It was that last session, when Rinpoche was saying goodbye to the group of us. There we were, sitting in the newly constructed great shrine hall which took so much effort and time to complete. Rinpoche was thanking all of us for coming, many from great distances. And he reflected on the original plans for this center, which came from his guru, the great 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, whom I was fortunate to meet in 1974.

And Rinpoche spoke of the yet-unrealized plans of His Holiness the 16th Karmapa to also build a retreat facility, a place where men and women could be trained in the traditional Tibetan closed-retreat that lasts three years, three months, and three days. In such a retreat, the retreatants never lie down to sleep for the entire time. They sleep sitting up in a special box. And as Rinpoche spoke, tears flowed down his face as he explained that he had not yet been able to fulfill the plans to build such a retreat as His Holiness had requested.

I can tell you, Rinpoche does not speak like this often, and there was not a dry eye in the place. When Rinpoche stopped speaking and we all filed out of the shrine room, I was in a kind of shock. To this day, I can remember the exact moment

and place where I was as I walked around the side of the monastery. I was so moved by Rinpoche's sharing with us his dreams. And it had been so difficult (and exhausting) just building the new monastery shrine-hall that I had no idea how we would ever be able (so it seemed at the time) to build a whole additional retreat complex. I cast about in my mind to see who among the students that I was just sitting with would be capable of enabling such a project and came up with only one option, and it took me by complete surprise. Perhaps only someone like me could do such a thing, if I really put my heart into it.

This realization found me kind of stunned and terrified at the very thought, but at the same time I knew I had to do it. My memory is not so good, but I must have sent a note or signaled somehow to Rinpoche that I was willing to try to help make this retreat center a reality, because I got a message that Rinpoche wanted to see me.

When I got to his room in the monastery, there was no translator and Rinpoche speaks no English. Rinpoche approached me and he had something in his hand, coming quite up-close. There was just the two of us. He placed into my hands what I now saw was a mala, the rosary-like-beads that Tibetans use for counting mantras. And he was saying something, something that I at first did not understand because of his English. He was saying "Mala, my mala."

As I looked down, I saw that he was handing me his own personal mala, giving it to me. Of course, I, and probably all of his students, had seen this incredible mala that was worn down from use like none I had ever seen. I was speechless. Rinpoche was entrusting me with his own mala and at the same time the responsibility of furthering the retreat project. That was all that was said that day, those few words and the placing of that precious mala in my hands.

When his translator learned of what Rinpoche had done, he was dumbfounded. He pointed out that Rinpoche had this mala from before he ever came to this country and had used it for many years to prepare for empowerment after empowerment, not to mention his in own practice. And the translator said he had hoped one day to inherit it, but he was

probably just kidding me. I was humbled by it all and hoped I could carry through with Rinpoche's intention.

Well, that's my story and I am glad to have finally said it openly. As for the retreat center, my wife Margaret and I actually helped to create that center, working hard to raise the funds and help to organize the whole thing, along with the totally generous help from the Chinese Buddhist community in and around New York. Our Chinese community is so incredible, so generous and so diligent. Americans are just beginning to learn how to support the dharma, if we want it to flourish, but the Chinese are raised in this ethic. I am so thankful for their support.

And so, the three-year retreat center was built. It is called Karmé Ling and is now in its fifth or sixth (perhaps more; I can't remember exactly) three-year retreat, turning out fully-trained lamas. Today, it is a whole complex, with a separate retreat house for men and woman, a lama house, shrine hall, fully-equipped kitchen for events and a great many separate retreat buildings for individuals, not to mention what are called the "long houses," rows of small retreat houses strung together. It also has a columbarium where the ashes of the sangha are placed. Karmé Ling is a wonderful place indeed.

Later on, during a visit by Rinpoche to our center, he went over his mala with me, almost bead by bead showing me where all of the parts came from, this bead from a particular great lama, another from the same lama but in a previous life and so on. Aside from the dharma and my family, that mala is my most precious possession.

Sempa Chönyi Rangdrol

The above is my Bodhisattva name. I was given the Bodhsattva vow many years ago as part of a large group, but we did not receive individual Bodhisattva names. Years later, I asked Rinpoche for a Bodhisattva name, He thought about it for a while and then give me the one listed above. Translated, "Sempa" means intention, "Chönyi" means Dharmata (true nature of the mind), and "Rangdrol" means self-liberating, so the name means "self-liberating nature-of-the-mind."

As mentioned, during a visit to our center here in Big Rapids in early May of 1991, KKR told me about the various parts of

the mala. First, the bodhi seeds were perfectly round at the beginning, as were all the corals. The seeds were never stained but became the deep brown glossy-color they are today through use. Neither the corals nor the seeds were filed, flattened or treated in any way.

Referring to the enclosed image, the red coral guru bead, the green slider stone next to it, and the red coral bead on the opposite side of the mala belonged and were used by the previous Thrangu rinpoche (not the current one), the two side red-corals belonged and were used by the current Thrangu Rinpoche.

The mantra counters were a gift from the current Thrangu Rinpoche. The tiny white bead on the red string was given to KKR by the monk about whom he tells the story that he had a dream in which almost all of the pus and abscess that was wracking his body vanished, all except a small part in his toes. The 10,000-Counter is an ordinary counter that KKR added to the mala.

Notes on Malas”

The Tibetan “rosary” or mala consists of 108 beads strung together around a central “guru” bead. Aside from the 108 beads, many practitioners (most) add three additional beads.

These three marker beads are often of old red-coral from Tibet. Originally, they were mined on the Southern coast of Italy and got to Tibet via the ancient trade routes – the Silk Road. In modern times, those beds died out, due to pollution, so there is no more of this kind of coral, I am told.

If you want to add these three marker beads, this will necessitate that the mala is restrung, which is kind of complicated. You may want to have someone who knows how to do it restring it.

These three beads should be place as follows, starting with the bead after the guru bead:

- (1) One after the 27th bead.
- (2) One after the 54th bead.
- (3) One after the 81st bead.

In other words, one bead is opposite the guru bead. The guru bead is the bead at the end with the tassel. The two other

beads are placed so to mark the quarters. These three extra beads are called counter or “marker” beads and most lamas string their malas this way. The extra beads are considered auspicious, because they cause us to do a few extra mantras, etc., in case we messed up on any of the 108. They are also, IMO, pretty.

THE AMATEUR

August 6, 2019

“Busy” again is the theme, but I am starting to get a handle on it. I find that in my case, there is a caveat. It is hard for me to separate work-busyness from pleasure busyness. And this is because all of my businesses, which I have created or founded, were based on what were hobbies that I loved. I am an amateur in the true sense of that word. In other words, I loved what I was doing so much that I made it the main thing that I did. It became a business, but I never stopped loving doing it.

So, perhaps some folks can separate what they do to make money from what they do for entertainment. I can't make that distinction. And when you mix in attachment and fixation along with entertainment, I can't tell the difference between work and play.

And so, we could say I have been out-to-lunch my whole life, lost in play, with very little time spent otherwise, as in “out-of-the-pocket,” so to speak, of what I am enjoying. This brings up the whole concept of dualism and non-dualism. Even when we undertake the non-dual realization practices like (Vipassana, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen), we are mixing them with what is called relative truth, dualistic experience, etc. The concept of “mixing” is very important, IMO, in dharma practice.

To me, it seems the more advanced practices are themselves a mix of relative and absolute truth, and this by definition. If we were all realized, there would be no differential of relative truth to work through like a round of worry beads. We would be enlightened.

Other than that, we are working through (and by means of) relative truth (again: like worry beads), processing the relative with the help of the absolute dharma practices. The realization practices seem to me to be a process of transforming Samsara into Nirvana or realizing that they are connate, two sides of the same coin. Perhaps, I digress.

My point here is that my business work and my entertainment “play” were pretty much the same thing all these years. Therefore, the exhaustion of attachment, etc. from the stroke thrust me into what was, for me, almost a virgin world, the world of not being occupied with something else. And this, perhaps more than the average bear.

My point here is that our attachments and entertainment play a much larger role than we might imagine. If we agree with the dharma teachings that our fixations and attachments prevent us from realizing our innate awareness then, to the degree we are focused on these attachments, etc., to that degree we are ignoring or not aware of our innate Awareness. That’s pretty clear. Or, are we? And it always comes down to “fixating” on whatever we are doing as compared to just pure sense of doing.

With that in mind, now let’s mix in the “mixing in” of relative (dualistic) and absolute (non-dualistic) truth. And there is a mix, although the proportions may change and be different for different ones among us. My first true dharma teacher in my life, Andrew Gunn McIver, used to hold up one of his little fingers and say that this slightly-crooked finger was all that was keeping him in this world. I had no idea at the time what he was referring to. Yet, he drilled it into me.

However, I realize now that basically he was saying that the relative truth of Samsara that we all want to get out of is necessary for the higher realization practices to function. Otherwise, we would already be realized and fully enlightened. Just as Vajrayana students doing the realization practices depend on thoughts (and almost anything Samsaric) as fuel for realization, therefore there is some symbiosis going on here. It is true, as the pith dharma texts state, that Samsara and Nirvana are “connate,” two different sides of the same coin.

Nirvana depends on Samsara as a means to achieve realization. In other words, Nirvana is just Samsara realized. This is an important point, because most folks assume that Nirvana is an escape from Samsara, but if you read the fine print, it’s not. It’s just Samsara transformed. So, no pie-in-the-sky there. We are always back to square one, which is where we should be. That my friends is the dharma. LOL.

So, as my recent stroke becomes not-so-recent and begins to fade into the sunset, I gradually am getting a better handle on what it was and what it means to me. It certainly was a wake-up call and a liberal education on top of that. I'm still learning from it.

Of course, I keep coming back to the fact that, stripped of all attachment and entertainment, I was pretty much helpless and a crybaby at that. More shocking than the stroke itself was my complete unfamiliarity with my innate Awareness, and this despite years of dharma practice and even the blessings of a root guru.

Yes, the stroke was thrust on me suddenly and clearly, yet even so, I not only didn't welcome my face-to-face with my own Awareness. I did everything to avoid it. LOL. Of course, I'm in the process of walking all that back, as I begin to lay the groundwork for increased familiarity with this same Awareness.

At least, I'm glad to know I didn't know. Speaking of which, here is a poem I wrote years ago trying to distinguish Platonism (which believes that we fell from a more enlightened state) from the dharma view (that we never yet have reached an enlightened state).

NEVER KNOWN

If I know,
I don't know I know,
And I know I don't know I know.

I don't know what I would know,
If I did know.
That's how I know I don't know.

So, I don't know,
I know I don't know,
And I know I know I don't know.
I have never known.

BOOK LEARNING: TO FAIL IGNORANCE BY A METER OR A FOOT

August 7, 2019

A problem I have is when folks tell me of profound books or pith teachings that I should read; of course, I want to read them, if only to see if reading them is more valuable at the moment than just monitoring my own mind as I now do. And like my own writing, many books and texts are (by definition) word-ridden; that's what books are. If the words of a particular book "click" with me, I may be able to read them. If not, I soon run out of steam and fall back into monitoring my own mindstream; I get more out of my own mind and practice than I can squeeze from that particular writing.

If it's a dharma text, I will almost always give it a try, but if it is in one of those old-school overly-scholarly dharma text formats, I usually don't get very far. I'm sure that we all have our favorite forms of presentation and mine are the siddhas and Mahasiddhas and their pith texts, often in what are called "dohas," the Indian and Tibetan songs or poems of spiritual experience. When I am receptive, I get the most out of those.

On the other hand, many of these same pith dharma texts are so concise that they may be too much in shorthand for me and I don't know the vocabulary well enough to unpack and expand them. And so, I am torn between trying to make the effort to decode the writing of whatever I read into my own speak or just letting it pass for now. It's not that I have not done any reading! LOL.

For me, it is often like panning for gold. The amount of gold I get for all the panning is not worth it. It's probably just me. I'm not saying it's not worthy writing, but rather that it's too loose and not compact or pithy enough to hold my attention. Some writing is so "prosey" that, IMO, it never gets around to the point, like a pyramid without the tip of the top.

To me, my own mind is often more interesting (warts and all) than with trying to make sense out of other folks writings. This is usually not true for pith dharma teachings, but as for my reading them, even the pith teachings come and go in cycles. Sometimes I can read them and soar in the sky and other

times I have to carefully put them down and tiptoe away until some time when I can.

If it's a dharma book, I'm usually game to dig in and at least sample reading it until I get a taste and some flavor from the writing, but as I age, this becomes less and less my choice. My mind is pretty good and I'm already on a trajectory that is (for me) airborne. I don't need other inspiration as much as I need to follow out the course of my own mind and practice. Make sense? Because, making sense of words, as you know, is what to me language is all about. I view all language as a call to act and experience, so I go and do that! LOL.

We all want to share with others what works for us; I know that is true for me. Yet, as you know from reading my blogs, with 5000 FB friends and another 2400 followers, I often get only a handful of "likes" and just a few comments and about zero questions. So, that tells us all something, especially me. LOL.

I have read a lot (probably too much) in this life and amassed massive libraries and collections, many of which are now placed here and there at universities, non-profits, and for-profits. I have more books around here than I can read and I still have all of my books on dharma – a room full. Yet, I'm reading less and less all the time, hardly ever fiction, and even non-fiction is seldom worth my time, not because the work is not a classic, but because the thread of my own lifeline is what I am living at the moment. Insight into everything lived in real-time is better than almost anything I might read.

And finally, IMO, Insight Meditation, the special form of Vipassana used in Mahamudra practice, is better than any book I know of. It is the lightning rod of pure learning from the mind itself. It is the best.

CONCENTRATION AND SHAMATA MEDITATION

August 8, 2019

[This is kind of complicated to follow, for which I apologize. It perhaps can be useful only to those who have had trouble learning to practice Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and might like an alternative.]

In learning sitting meditation, which is called Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), a student is asked to focus or concentrate on an object (almost any object will do) and at the same time have mindfulness when we lose focus on that object and our mind wanders off. This act of concentration is often defined as one-pointedness. The two qualities, mindfulness and concentration work together in practicing and learning Tranquility Meditation, being mindful when we lose our one-pointedness and helping to re-focus on the object of meditation (a stone, stick, spot-on-the-wall, etc.) by renewed concentration.

IMO, concentration too easily takes on the character of force and willfulness, i.e. we WILL concentrate on the object of meditation. Mindfulness requires minding our awareness (or lack thereof) and concentration too often is seen as having the force of mind to stay on the object that is the target of Shamata meditation.

Here I would like to talk about concentration, the degree and kind of concentration needed to practice Tranquility Meditation (Shamata). Folks learning meditative concentration often assume that their degree of concentration depends on the amount of effort or will they apply. And yet, willful effort is seldom helpful in itself.

Let's keep in mind that the goal of Tranquility Meditation is to stay on-point and not lose sight of the object of meditation, but to remain mindful of it. And the whole practice is just that, "practice," an exercise in learning to concentrate and be mindful. That's why dharma students call learning this form of meditation as their "Practice." We are not just meditating yet, but practicing how to meditate. The two should not be

confused, but they often are. And, IMO, the idea of “effort” is key.

Yes, we have to initially make some effort to learn to meditate, much like a bobsled team has to push the bobsled at the start of a run, but very soon have to stop pushing and jump on and ride. In Shamata Meditation, concentration is similar in that effort is applied, but as mentioned, only provisionally. As soon as possible, like scaffolding on a building, any effort must be let-go-of or removed. Ultimately, we are looking for the ride, natural concentration based on mindfulness and not effort.

For those beginning meditators who are having trouble mastering the concentration necessary for Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), there is another approach you might want to consider. This is to replace the idea of “effort” or “will to concentrate” with a natural interest in the process of meditation. In fact, this has been my personal experience, so those for whom the following qualifies, please take note:

An alternative and better way (IMO, because for me it worked!) to attain stable concentration is to look among our mental skills and habits for where we have already learned to master concentration in life (and preferably naturally), meaning out of sheer interest and love. Many of us have hobbies and skills (or perhaps enthusiasms) where we are keenly interested and just can naturally concentrate our focus without any effort at all. We just love to do whatever the technique or hobby is, whether it is fly-tying, playing chess, building models, playing golf or, in my case, computer programming.

In the above examples of hobbies and skills, the concentration is naturally there. We already have it and can use it without further effort; and if some effort is involved, we already love to make that effort, so it’s essentially effortless. In any case, the process is not arduous, and we are not just doing it by rote because we have been told to do it. Do you see the point?

I found it was easier to piggyback on the concentration acquired from one of my hobbies or skills (in my case computer-programming) than to sit on the cushion and focus

on a stick, a stone, or the cycle of the breath. As a skilled programmer, I already knew how to concentrate perfectly and had done so out of natural interest and the sheer love of doing it for many years. This natural ability to concentrate is a gift when it comes to meditation and the concentration required.

When I was first trying to sit in meditation, I had great trouble learning to concentrate while sitting on the cushion practicing Tranquility Meditation (Shamata). I sat and I sat and I tried and I tried, yet no amount of effort ever got me anywhere to speak of. Then, one time my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, remarked to a group of us something to the effect that those of us who spend a lot of time on a computer may have a leg up on others in learning meditation, in particular concentration. Well, that rang a bell with me.

As a systems programmer, I had spent decades writing computer code which can be (and is) very demanding. Even one character out of place and the program won't run. I know it well! LOL. And in that moment, when Rinpoche pointed this out, I realized in a flash that I already was an expert on concentrating, but my concentration had always been based on a keen interest in what I was doing. Yet, sitting there on a cushion, trying to do something (meditate) that I didn't know how to do or know what was supposed to happen and turn out, was not the environment in which I was used to concentrating in. And, rote concentration was foreign to me. I was used to concentrating when I cared for or was interested in something, for me a natural process.

In other words, by "trying" to meditate I was salting the salt, so to speak, trying to concentrate on concentrating, rather than finding a way to just naturally concentrate because of a true interest in the process of meditating, a process that I by definition did not understand and had yet no experience with. What is this thing called "meditation" all about? LOL.

Once I realized that I was already an expert as to concentrating, everything fell into place rather quickly; however, that is another story. The takeaway here, for those who already have mastered concentration using a hobby or skill, is that it may be easier to learn Tranquility Meditation

(Shamata) using your particular acquired skill. In other words, learn Tranquility Meditation with a skill you already have. And, once learned, then gradually transfer your skill from the hobby to the cushion.

I am just pointing out the possibility of learning sitting meditation in this alternate way. Keep in mind, that Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is not particular as to what we concentrate on (stick, stone, breath, etc.), although following the breath is perhaps the focus most-often used. Resting focus on an object, unwaveringly, and without effort is what is important. You get the idea.

From my own experience, how all of these forms of meditation come together varies with the individual. Once I understood that the concentration I used in my computer programming was the exact same kind of concentration needed for Shamata training, I was able to relax and stop trying so hard. As luck would have it, as it turned out, where I applied that concentration of Tranquility Meditation so that Vipassana (Insight Meditation) eventually could arise was not on the computer, but with a camera with special lenses on it, crawling around in the wet grass at dawn. As they say “Who woulda’ thunk it.” That too is another story.

Yet, what I’m presenting here as an alternative approach to learning concentration on the cushion from scratch and which I’m trying to share with you now, was a concentration built upon pure interest and a natural love of doing what I was focused and concentrating on, which in my case was tiny perfect worlds and critters as seen through better and better macro-photography lenses. I was loving what I was doing and totally into it, so that any effort was no-effort. It was in that kind of situation, very natural to me, that my mind stabilized with Shamata and Vipassana (Insight Meditation) first arose. I am not a great fan of rote practice, but of practicing with love of the practice.

WAITING FOR “RECOGNITION”

August 8, 2019

In 1964, while living, working, and studying in Berkeley, California I took a trip with a friend up through northern California and southern Oregon along the Klamath River. In particular, we navigated the narrow logging roads, where fast moving trucks, loaded with logs, could not easily stop while hurtling downhill, which meant that any passenger car had to actually get off the road or be possibly knocked out of the way, with only seconds notice. It was scary and dangerous.

Anyway, when we were up there, we stopped along a wide stream where it was pretty shallow, and I waded in. The large Pacific salmon were fighting their way upstream and you could actually touch or catch them as they struggled upstream. I stood in the water and watched for a while and then followed the water upstream a ways until I reached a large deep pool, beyond which the salmon could not pass. As I looked down from the rocks above into the pool, I saw that it was filled with huge salmon all almost motionless, each situated at different depths in the pool. It was awesome and somehow surreal. It left a lasting impression.

This experience still comes to mind frequently with its memories and, oddly enough, mostly in relation to dharma students who have completed the Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries, but have not yet achieved the fruit of the pointing-out instructions, which is called “Recognition,” being the recognition of the true nature of the mind.

Just as I felt compassion for those huge salmon and their situation, it seems to me that there is a great (and deep) pool of dharma practitioners which, like the salmon, are unable to go farther and further their realization by recognizing the true nature of the mind (Recognition) without the guidance and pointing-out instructions of an authentic guru, a lama who has mastered this particular realization called “Recognition.”

It seems that dharma masters are in short supply in America just now. The older teachers are, well, getting older and we Americans as a group are not yet generating many of our own

masters. Thus, we have this pool of practitioners waiting to have the actual nature of the mind pointed out to them.

There are teachers that can do this, give the pointing-out instructions, but a student interested in being instructed would have to seek them out and take the teachings to prepare for that. Of those who are capable of pointing out the nature of the mind to students, there are some who don't have the time and some who will take the time to help out if approached properly. I don't even pretend to give the pointing-out instructions, but I am glad to answer questions about the various preliminary practices that would prepare you for the pointing-out instructions.

In the case of the great salmon suspended in the deep wide pool, they never made it upstream to spawn, nor did they return to the sea. These Pacific salmon died there in that pool.

“THE OCEAN OF DEFINITIVE MEANING”

August 9, 2019

“Realization in a book” or at least here we have a book on Mahamudra realization that makes sense. For those aspiring students of Mahamudra meditation, there are many teachings and books available on the topic, of which a small number are considered “essential” writings. Chief among these writings are “The Ocean of Definitive Meaning” by the ninth Karmapa (Wangchuk Dorje 1556-1603), “Dispelling the Darkness of Ignorance (also by the ninth Karmapa), plus this earlier text, Moonbeams of Mahamudra” by Dakpo Tashi Namgyal (1511-1587).

The translator, Elizabeth M. Callahan, IMO, who has best translated “The Ocean of Definitive Meaning” years ago (although it is only available by special permission from Nitartha International), has in this new volume translated the other two, “Moonbeams of Mahamudra” and “Dispelling the Darkness of Ignorance.”

Callahan’s translation of “The Ocean of Definitive Meaning” has been like the Bible to me for years. It is so well-written and perfectly useful. And now this translation of the essential text, “Moonbeams of Mahamudra,” is available and, IMO, Callahan has outdone even herself with this very remarkable book. I am overwhelmed by it to the point of installing a red ribbon in the book, just so I can keep my place more easily. And it sits on my desk, all 771 pages and three pounds of it.

This is not a book to carry lightly (LOL), but carry it I do and I can’t resist just opening it during the day and reading here and there. It’s “all good,” as they say, and I am still just taking it in a bit at a time. This is a book that will take a lifetime to read and re-read, because it is evergreen. I can’t read it enough and I can see that by the time I get around to re-reading any section, I will have changed enough in my understanding that it’s like finding a new book of the same quality.

The book is available in the Kindle digital-edition and in hardcover. I chose the hardcover version that is \$40.95 new,

but I found a new copy for \$33.30 that was also new from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

You can see that I'm enthused. I received my copy of Callahan's "Moonbeams of Mahamudra," the Elizabeth Callahan edition just days ago, but what a breath of fresh air! In all respect to her predecessors, I had labored over the difficult-for-me-to-read Lhalungpa translation for decades, and the fine Traleg Kyabgon edition (a brilliant teacher!) as well, but although both are excellent, neither were as complete and detailed as Callahan's translation, IMO. I tried to squeeze life out of these early versions and assumed it was just me that was the problem, but in truth these earlier versions were just too conceptual or somehow over my head. They didn't connect with me.

But the Callahan edition is just wonderful, perhaps not a walk in the park (as such a profound text should be), but very understandable, workable, and informing. I always felt the importance of the "Moonbeams of Mahamudra" text but could not quite access it in the way I imagined I might. This recent translation by Elizabeth Callahan is incredibly detailed, yet totally approachable. If nothing else, here in one volume are all the detailed instructions for Mahamudra practice, plus as many pithy quotations related to Mahamudra from the siddhas and Mahasiddhas that one could ever hope for. I am so very grateful that it exists. Such a treasure in a book!

Please note: this is not light reading, but a reference book and instruction manual for all Mahamudra students. Or, you could own it just for the hundreds of short (almost haiku-like) poems and quotes it contains. Just reading one or two of these at a time clarifies my mind and helps me stay on center.

WHAT I'M GOOD FOR

August 11, 2019

We all have someone or something in mind when we write. I don't know how it works, but it does. And by "someone," I don't mean a particular person, although sometimes that's also true. What I do mean is that I have an interest in and, if this is not too corny, a compassion for dharma practitioners at a certain level of practice.

It's easy to figure out why, because that is just the stage I had the most trouble with myself and I fear and hope that they do not have to go through what I had to go through, because much of it was just not necessary. So, I ask myself just what stage was that, anyway?

Well, there is no point in writing for people at the stage I'm at (whatever that is), because those folks don't need what I have to offer because they have something just like it of their own. So, that would be a fool's mission. You can't salt the salt, "sames repel," and all of that. There has to be a difference for there to be attraction, or so they say.

And, I am not that great at teaching the fundamentals of dharma, although I try and am willing, especially if I'm asked a question. And, it appears from looking at my own writings that my interest (and compassion) is for those folks who have mostly finished the purification practices (or are trying to do them), but are a bit lost on how to proceed from there.

And, I have nothing but empathy for this group, because I was stuck there for what seemed like the longest time and could not find my way forward. Most of all, I have a pretty fair idea of what that stage is all about, and what in it (at least for me) was a big waste of time. I do my best to flag others not to go there.

I also know (or at least believe) that the no-mans-land between Ngondro and "Recognition" (of the true nature of the mind) is a particularly difficult transition. We can be stuck there for what seems like forever. I know I was.

And so, I don't think of myself as a "dharma teacher," except perhaps with a few people I've synched with, but rather I'm a dharma-sharer and the area I seem to care most about is helping folks get ready for the pointing-out instructions. Helping practitioners to find the confidence they need to get through the passage or transition from the dualistic (purification) practices to the non-dual (realization) practices, particularly Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is, for me, where it's at.

In particular, I find that Insight Meditation of the special kind that is indicated in the Kagyu Mahamudra tradition is exactly my cup of tea. I have never gotten over how much Insight Meditation can change a practice and I want to help others achieve that if they can. That is my particular kind of Bodhicitta.

THE SILENT SCREAM

August 13, 2019

Well, after a little minor surgery, I'm back at it again. This is probably, one for the road, but I may have said that before. Anyway, I am still sorting out the innate Awareness we all share, but that most are almost or completely unaware of. I don't know how to draw attention to this, but I do feel it is important, even though words, by definition, fail.

As mentioned, I'm once again drawing your attention to our basic awareness, the innate awareness that allows you to read this sentence, the same awareness that makes everything bright and illuminated. And, we can't wipe out or void this intrinsic awareness, what is called Vivid Awareness or sometimes referred to as the light of the mind. This Awareness has always been there and is still there and will be there. It certainly is the elephant in the room.

Having had two strokes where my sense of Self, attachments, and all entertainment-escape was voided or vacated, I found that messing with that awareness never happened. My mind after a stroke was just as it always has been as far as clarity and lucidity, minus whatever upset I was currently experiencing, like being in the hospital, etc. Without our intrinsic awareness, we would have nothing to be aware with.

And so, I want to revisit this idea of the loss of entertainment and the Self (hopefully for reader's sake) one last time, at least as it affects me. I have pointed out several times in blogs that, at the moment of the stroke and afterward, my attachments and fixations were wiped out; completely gone. Had I not been forced to experience it, I would have never imagined how excruciating being without the shadow of my fixations, attachment, and entertainment could be. I can only tell you "about" it.

Yet, in all that, my mind was absolutely clear and normal, if we consider that I had no attachment-clothes on; it was as if I were naked as a J-bird and standing on the plane of a vast mirror stretching to infinity. It was just me (whoever I am, LOL) and this Awareness that allows me to be aware of

anything at all. And, here is the punchline: At that moment, I was aware of the Awareness more than my Self (which was at the time shattered). This Awareness became front and center. I had never really noticed it before... not in my entire life. And suddenly, it was all that was there.

In other words, with nothing else around to distract me, the Awareness was center stage and overpowering. By overpowering, I mean it was overpoweringly bright by way of its sheer lack of entertainment. In that stark light, there were no shadows and thus no shadowy place I could go, hide, or ignore. I was stuck out there in what was like an infinite flat plane, with what was like a stark, pure, lack-of-anything-that-I-wanted (or could) be attached to. I was stripped naked, and with no relief. It was so harsh. I had never been without my entertainments to that degree and I had no cover.

As for searching for words, it was like I was silently screaming, but without an echo and with no ears to even hear the sound. It reminds me of the painting by Edward Munch called "The Scream," which represents how it was, quite nicely. LOL.

There was no physical pain, yet being exposed to the blinding awareness of zero entertainment, of no familiar filter of attachment or sense of Self, was excruciating beyond words. I couldn't stand it and searched everywhere for some place to hide and get out of the blazing light; and instead there was the silent scream I mentioned above. It was me screaming, but once removed.

Of course, I had been in the hospital being crammed and scanned with tests, hospital food, and trying to sleep through the night. It took me a while to figure out that much of "me, myself, and I" was gone, vacated. Everything was all about now and the immediate. Be sure to register that: now and the immediate and nothing else. I had never before been forced to be as immediate or in the moment.

It's not that I had no memories, but rather than I couldn't access them without great difficulty. It was not worth the trouble and it was just easier to remain in the present moment devoid of any entertainment whatsoever. I was an isolate.

It's not that the present moment was so terrible, but rather that without the familiar filter of my attachments I was not the same person or whatever. Without all my entertainment garb, who was I at all? And this went for a lot of my attachment to the dharma. Gone! How terrifying was that! LOL. What there was plenty of was naked-Awareness, but as mentioned, it made me very, very uncomfortable to be in that bright light. I am somewhat getting used to it.

It was not an actual "light," but more the feeling of being completely exposed and naked without the habitual filter of my personality to look through. It's like someone had snatched away my rose-colored glasses or my ability to reify and project everything. I had nothing to look through, no filter and no view other than "no view." And, without much control, I didn't like it. LOL.

I was at a masquerade party, but with no mask.

THE POINT OF POINTING OUT

August 15, 2019

It is a peculiarity of the dharma, in my experience, that once you have learned to meditate, and by “meditate” here I don’t mean simply sitting meditation (i.e. Tranquility Meditation); I mean properly combining Tranquility Meditation with Insight Meditation (Vipassana) as part of Mahamudra Meditation, a practice through which many doors are opened. And so, when mixed properly, Shamata + Vipassana = Mahamudra. That idea.

Mahamudra Meditation is a non-dual form of meditation, which traditionally means “not two” or “one undivided without a second,” yet this non-dual meditation necessarily uses as fuel, almost anything that “IS” dualistic: words, ideas, thoughts, emotions, kleshas, and what-have-you? In other words, out of any “two,” one is created and remains. And a key or crucial factor in the kind of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) that is part of Mahamudra Meditation is “Certainty.”

In fact, “Certainty” of this kind is “Absolute Certainty” and not just a “maybe yes, maybe no.” I did not expect this kind of certainty and was (and continue to be) amazed by it. Of course, it is “Certainty” to the limit of our abilities, meaning it 100% encapsulates us personally, but your certainty and my certainty may differ, yet as an old garage mechanic once said to me, so that I heard his words: “I will do my best; more than that I cannot do.” It’s like that. To be clear, let me rephrase that.

“Non-dual” meditation is not the same as something like tunnel-vision, as in shutting things out, aside from the fact that when we do go all out (or all-in), we are each, as mentioned, absolutely limited by our own personality and its limits. We all have filters or limits that we can’t go or see beyond. So, when we say that we are “all in,” that means we are all-in up to (and including) our limits.

We immerse ourselves in the purity of the awareness that we innately have. In other words, if we are going all-out, fully

extending into or until we reach and include the natural limits of our personal realization of the mind, and that by definition excludes everything that is beyond our limits; that's the definition of limits.

In other words, if we are fully extended to the limits of our extensibility, then we are concentrated or concentrating to the best of our ability. IMO, that is better than some concept of concentration requiring effort of some kind. If we are naturally interested in (or love) what we are doing, what more could there be than that? That is IMO the best form of concentrating. If we can't concentrate like that, with love, we should "stop the presses" until we can.

And that is why I have always favored loving what I'm doing because I'm interested and not because I "have" to or should. I hope you hear me in this; that is the best kind of concentration (and mindfulness) that I know of.

If that kind of natural interest and love are then brought to focus (or to bear) on any dharma question or attribute, I have found that the universe best gives up its secrets in a clear and easy-to-assimilate manner. And this is because the universe can only make sense to us through our own senses and filters (Self, Kleshas, emotions, etc.), whatever filters that we have going for us.

And so, given love and interest (and non-duality), we have a direct channel from the universe through our senses to our innate or pure self, with as small a filter between us and reality as possible. That's why we do all the purification dharma practices, to get our fixations down to a transparent level so we can see through them to whatever is beyond. They no longer obscure us.

And so, my point is just: what is non-dual meditation?

The best I can come up with is that non-dual meditation is when everything we have is all-in and we are totally fully extended in our senses, feeling whatever is there that can be felt. It's like totally filling a tight glove with our hand. Don't discount the senses! We could say that it is the dharma speaking directly to us in our most intimate language. With our senses, we are getting "direct voice," so to speak.

The purity and individuality of Insight Meditation is like nothing else I have ever experienced; it can't help but be treasured, IMO. Insight Meditation is better than 1,000 dharma courses or innumerable teachings; exploring the mind of dharma with Insight Meditation is to get impeccable answers to our dharma questions or queries, answers tailored to our specific individual needs and in a language just makes sense to us. That last sentence may roll off the tongue, but is very, very important to grasp, especially "making sense."

It is written in the dharma teachings that when the historical Buddha spoke to an assembly of listeners, each person heard his words in their particular tongue and to their needs. IMO, and in my direct experience, Insight Meditation is like having the dharma exclusively taught to us in a language perfect for us to understand and assimilate. It is direct sensing of the dharma, all signal, no noise, and free of all intellectual conceptualization. It's like the Buddha (or the Dharma) is talking to us directly.

Indeed, the mind is, as the Tibetan's call it, the "Wish-Fulfilling Gem." Ask and you shall receive. From my experience, the special form of Insight Meditation used in Mahamudra Meditation is like mixing the purity of non-dual wisdom with relative-truth in the correct proportions such that the relative-truth is elucidated, resolved, and realized. We are transforming samsara into nirvana by realization! That may seem like a mouthful and perhaps is hard to understand. But please take this in and discuss.

It's like that common dualistic (relative-truth) is purified with the non-dual wisdom of Insight Meditation to reveal its essence as wisdom of one kind or another. This is direct teaching on whatever topic we sincerely ask for. This is why our even talking like this is ineffable, beyond the ability of word to express. Yet, all of the written dharma in history is an attempt to point out something that we can only realize directly. That's the point of pointing out.

That is certainty.

SHOCKS FOR THE SYSTEM

August 16, 2019

This is my version of an op-ed piece, in this case it's about dharma and the difficulties we can have in connecting to it practically. I understand that in any interpretation or assimilation of the dharma, great flexibility is required, just like cars have shocks and a suspension system. There has to be a certain degree of give and take, even with the dharma.

And even with the best teachings, the best teachers, and the best students, there still seems to be an unavoidable gap between the conceptual teachings themselves and connecting directly with the sense of it all of dharma students. Perhaps it is as simple as that words cannot express the meaning of dharma realization and that conceptual dharma is by definition a bridge that can be (or usually is) too far. Words can never deliver 100%, so for each of us the gap somehow must be gapped. That's the problem and why eventually each of us need an authentic dharma-master to help with the bridge.

Getting from understanding a dharma concept to the actually experiencing it in reality, much less to then realizing the nature of that actual experience so that we can use or work with it is a gap that most of us cannot manage to cross easily, if at all. It seems to require a lot of work on our part and perhaps even a leap or two. If not, why would we not collectively have achieved Recognition by now and have it confirmed by an authentic dharma teacher?

If you consider that all the great dharma teachings point out that our inner awareness (our Buddha Nature) is already inside or within us and all that remains it to just be shown or pointed out to us; perhaps you see the problem.

Just as we cannot look at our own eyes without a mirror, so it seems we cannot realize our own nature, which is such an integral part of us. It is too close or too much with-us to see. It would be like looking for your eyeglasses when you already have them on, which I have done. LOL.

It's not unlike some sort of mental brain surgery, IMO. What is subtle about it is exactly what students fail to recognize, because they fail to achieve Recognition. I know this well, because one of the highest lamas in the lineage, one of the four Heart Sons of the Kagyu Lineage (which I will not name here), His Eminence, once took me into a small room, sat me down in a chair, and then sat down on a chair directly across from me, looking at me directly, face-to-face and very close, and gave me pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind. The only problem was that I failed to recognize the nature of my own mind and had to hang my head and walk out of the room. Imagine that! Oh well, nothing ventured, nothing gained and it was his idea to do this. LOL.

And so, I know something about the study, the literature, the practices of, and process of Recognition, and I hope that something I offer here may be useful to even one of you. Some may say that I am too negative, but I'm not at all negative, yet I will pop as many balloons as I can, so that you might get your head out of the clouds of conceptuality and come down to earth where Recognition is actually possible to achieve. My two-cents is that Recognition is not what you think it is, where you think it is, and it will not come about as you think it will. Otherwise it already would have!

One has to completely relax to achieve what is called in the dharma "Recognition," IMO. It requires the most familiar-with-yourself moment you can manage, one without second-thoughts, self-consciousness, or conceptualization of any kind. And efforts to achieve Realization are counterproductive, because it has to be effortless on our part. Effort is just another obscuration and not a help.

And I would add, and this perhaps is just me, all of this cannot come about unless we are somehow uprooted from our habitual daily habits (or ruts). This is why so many Mahamudra texts pertaining to Recognition and the pointing-out instructions say that some abrupt or sudden shock, anything that forces us out of our one-track habits and fixations, may be necessary, i.e. some shock to the system. At least, such a shock was necessary for me. I was just too drunk on attachment to pop out of where I was so used to; I was definitely stuck in my status-quo. I needed a stick of

dynamite, so to speak, to dislodge me from the casket of my habits. You may too, and that may be not easy to come by artificially or on demand. However, life will provide each of us with those shocks, from time to time, so when they do, value and take advantage of them.

We could discuss.

RECOGNITION: RECOGNIZING OUR WILD STALLION

August 17, 2019

Let's talk about the Recognition of the mind. I have two things to say in this article. "Recognition" of the mind is like turning on a light switch. The switch is either OFF or ON. You either have or have not had the recognition of the true nature of the mind. It's like that old chestnut "you can't be a little bit pregnant." You either are or you are not."

However, one's Recognition, while present or absent (you have had it or not) can be shallow or deep. That's point number one, which is pretty straight-forward. The second point I would like to make is more subtle and I may have to work at making it clear.

Above, I pointed out that having recognized the true nature of the mind via the pointing-out instructions of an authentic dharma teacher, our Recognition can be either shallow, deep, or somewhere in between. In any case, shallow or deep, if it is present, it can't be walked back. Recognition is a one-way street. If you have it, you have it (know it without a shadow of a doubt) and can't lose or forget it. However, you CAN let it lie fallow. And here is where it gets more subtle.

If a student has recognized the true nature of the mind and recognized it completely and all at once, they would not only have Recognition, but simultaneously have reached the full Enlightenment of a Buddha. There would be no further realization needed. However, as the Tibetans say, this event is rarer than hen's teeth or daytime stars. Basically, it does not happen.

What does happen is that Recognition is not complete realization, but rather more like breaking through not everywhere and all-inclusive (as in Enlightenment) but more like a pinhole of realization, peeking through the veil of our obscurations or perhaps like at a birth from a womb, the head is born, but the body of realization is yet to come. Still, there is Recognition, and that is a realization, just not a complete one.

In Recognition, we may have managed to have our head emerge, but the much larger part of us remains to be realized. We have realization, but we have realization of some part, here, there, or somewhere, depending where in the world our realization first appears. It could break through anywhere, but it is somewhere in our world.

Our breakthrough to realization has to be somewhere specific, but where? And since it is totally uncommon (as mentioned) that we recognize the nature of the mind in its entirety (which would be Enlightenment), we have realization that first appears here or there and not everywhere. In other words, this is Recognition, yet the particular realization has to be further expanded and extended to reach enlightenment. It is where we start the long journey to Enlightenment from.

We have to, through actual and continued effort, extend and expand the point of realization where we broke through until it encompasses all of the mind itself. It is exactly like the image of a drop of water that falls in the middle of a calm lake or pool. That drop gradually expands by concentric rings, each wider ring encompassing more and more of the surface of the water until it embraces the entire pool. That's a good analogy, IMO. Now, back to what may be hard to grasp.

The particular point, like a baby's first breath, where we initially break through to realization is like sticking our head through the surface of a sphere. While it does not matter where on the surface of the sphere we pop through (because it is Realization no matter where we poke through), where we happen to first realize the nature of the mind can (and does) differ for any one of us, it is realization nevertheless. And here is the point:

While it does not matter what point (or means) through which we first realize the nature of the mind, that point is just a single point on an entire sphere (this analogy again). In order to expand and extend our realization and to eventually reach enlightenment, we have to realize the entire sphere, including every other point on that sphere. That takes time and effort, even if that effort has to be effortless. LOL.

And this can be further complicated by the fact that wherever we break through, that particular point or area of the sphere,

de facto becomes special for us, because it is the area where we broke through. In other words, it is easy (very easy) to become attached to that particular means or area where we first broke through. In fact, it is almost impossible not to because it draws attention to itself.

We could almost say that this point or this means where we break through is the actual Yidam for us, the means or avenue we use to reach Recognition, where it first happens. Let that comment sync in, if you will.

That is the one place or means in the entire world through which we achieved Recognition, so it is difficult for us not to think of it as somehow magical and special. Of course, we can become attached to this “means” and it becomes an obstacle (that attachment) we then have to overcome.

That point of breakthrough, that particular means, becomes the key (for us) to enlightenment, at least provisionally, because it was where we first poked our head beyond Samsara and recognized the nature of the mind. If it helps, the point or means where Recognition occurred in my case, was not on the cushion (as I would have imagined) but through photography. Therefore, I became VERY attached to photography, which subsequently had to be overcome. That should help you understand.

It could have been any point, any means, and any vehicle, but it was my point and my means. Khenpo Rinpoche once taught that Recognition is like a herd of wild horses thundering across the plains. At Recognition, we recognize one particular wild stallion in the herd, a stallion perhaps covered with dirt and unkempt hair, and of this color and not that color, with this amount of wildness and not that, and so on. This Recognition point is when we realize that this particular wild stallion is OUR wild stallion, and that we and we alone must tame it. Yet, we have this stallion to ride now. That is the idea or point of Recognition.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but to be clear, we start with the stallion, where we first broke through, and from there forward in time, it is up to us to expand and extend that point until it embraces the entire sphere (Enlightenment), just as the drop of water in a calm pool creates circles that

increasingly embrace the pond. That analogy is what I am trying here to share and communicate, how it relates to Recognition of the true nature of the mind.

And while any of us who achieves Recognition will have some realization at first, the particular kind of realization may differ, yet over time each of us, by expanding and extending our realization will eventually embrace the entire sphere and realize the same Enlightenment.

Now, I could probably describe this many ways, but the above is one of them. What is important is that you grasp what I am trying to explain and point out. Do you? And if so, you must have some questions or comments. At least I would. LOL.

BEYOND RECOGNITION: EXPANSION AND EXTENSION

August 18, 2019

I have had no one to talk with about this because most people don't talk about it, but I see no reason that we should not. It's the mechanics of dharma, plain and simple. IMO, the more we can learn about it, the better we can position ourselves for the event. That is my view.

"Recognition" of the true nature of the mind is not Enlightenment or anything close to it. In fact, in my experience, Recognition is just the beginning of actual meditation, rather than just "practicing" meditation. As realization goes, Recognition is just the first drop in the bucket of formal realization and marks the end of what most dharma practitioners call their "practice." It's a long and arduous journey from Recognition to Enlightenment.

I don't know how the expansion and extension of realization after Recognition goes for others, but only how it has been for me. And, in a word, it has been difficult, at least at first. Certainly, the dharma pith-texts make it clear that our realization after Recognition must be expanded and extended by us; otherwise it stays where it is and remains only as what it initially was, while we (and our life) move on and perhaps ignore it. This too apparently happens.

And so, I feel we should discuss and share information on how recognition and its realization can actually be expanded and extended. How is this done? In my experience, it was very difficult indeed and I am still working hard on it every single day. That's how important it is, IMO.

To start out with, Recognition itself is earth-shaking and life changing. We can prepare for it, but there is not way to be prepared for the actuality of it, because it is a realization and not just another experience. To my knowledge, we are not the same afterward.

Perhaps chief among the attributes of Recognition is the realization of "Certainty." Certainty is just that, being certain

and absolutely certain at that. And this for the first time in our dharma practice.

For me, it was the certainty that my particular situation (and karma) was workable. There was the sense of “I got this. I can drive this car,” so to speak. This, after a lifetime of wondering if I could or would ever have real confidence. Suddenly, we have our own back. There is no telling someone who has achieved Recognition that they have not, because they know better. Why? Because they have achieved it and achieving it is certainty beyond the shadow of a doubt. Period. End of story.

At Recognition, everything that was hanging in suspension about our particular dharma practice then precipitates. We finally can get our arms around it and we do. And recognition can't be undone, because it is a realization and not just another experience that comes and goes like the cycle of the moon. With Recognition, a door closes behind us forever, a door to all of the “sounds like this” or maybe this is true or not, and the endless, endless practice of the dharma. With recognition, we stop practicing meditation and actually start to just meditate.

Please don't get me wrong. We don't stop our formal dharma practice, but we continue, yet are not practicing meditation; we are meditating. So, nothing changes other than everything. LOL.

I could go on describing the attributes of Recognition as I see them, but of greatest important to those who have Recognition is how do we extend and expand it. My worries about attempting to explain this is that I might speculate, and speculation is just that. As Trungpa Rinpoche once said “Your guess is as good as mine.” So, forgive me, but I have to use the thread of my own experience in expanding realization and you will have to, as Gerard Manley Hopkins so eloquently said: “Suck any sense from that who can.” LOL

I suggest you read the previous blog in this series carefully, because there is no space to lay it all out again here. Nor here will I present the many years of intense practice between when I received the pointing-out instructions from my authentic guru and when I was able to implement those

instructions enough for there to be a result in my dharma life. And I have written in the past that, because I am so lazy and prone to entertaining myself, the result of my having received the pointing-out instructions didn't just come along in the normal course of my life.

For me, it took the perfect storm of instructions, years of intense practice, and of crucial importance the fact that life dealt me a glancing blow and threw me into real shock. That shock gave me the seriousness I needed to concentrate and, like my recent stroke, shattered my Self and attachments enough to allow me the space and time for a result to ripen and be had.

And, as I have liberally written, my Recognition did not come, as I had always assumed, while sitting on the cushion. How naïve of me to imagine that! Recognition, in my case, instinctively gravitated to that area of my life where I traditionally felt most at home since a child, which is Mother Nature.

The shock of the untoward life-event sent me packing out into the fields and streams, where I was alone with myself for something like six months. I don't want to minimize, in my case, the importance of that shock, although I never invited it. LOL. It grounded me good.

And so, in terms of understanding how to expand realization, we first have to clearly know through what physical medium recognition came or arose. In my case, Recognition came from (and then resulted from) crawling around on my belly in the wet grass at dawn, watching the sun come up each morning taking macro photographs of the perfect worlds of tiny critters and plants. At some point, I stopped being someone looking through a fine lens at an object and seeing a frog or a bug; instead, I saw the "Seeing" itself seeing. And not dualistically. There just was the "Seeing," which I had never seen. And with that, I changed or realized. There is no room here for that story either, but it is available in my writings. Now, I have shared enough here to talk about how to extend it, which is the point of this article.

In the beginning (and for the longest time), like most of a year, I could only enjoy the Insight Meditation (Vipassana) of

Mahamudra that coincides with Recognition by using a camera and lens. In other words, I had to take my camera and go out in the woods and meadows and take photos if I wanted to practice Mahamudra. It was out there, doing that where “Seeing” was seen, so to speak. Needless, to say I did it a lot, like every day for six months I watched the sun come up... that sort of thing. I don’t believe I had seen the sun come up, except by accident, for many years before that time. LOL.

Yet, after a while, when I got used to this form of meditation, I began to wonder why I could not have the same experience as with a camera and lens in other areas of my life. It was awkward and then very difficult as winter came on and it was too cold to go out with a camera and spend hours doing that.

Then, like someone with paralyzed limbs which can’t move, very slowly I tried to see if I could even begin to lift even one finger (so to speak); lo and behold, it moved. From then on it was just a matter of work. I began to exercise my wish to extend my realization from photography to other areas of my life, in this case writing blogs like this one. I wanted to have the experience of writing in the same clarity and lucidity I found with photography. That was my goal.

Well, long story short, I began to make progress, but it took about a year and a half of constant work and real effort to expand my world of realization to also include writing. It was clear to me all the time that this was simply a matter of confidence and that if I had it, I could have done it immediately and I am sure some folks can. However, not me.

Lacking that kind of walking-through-walls ability, I had to do it like an inchworm, one inch at a time. Yet, the good news is that I COULD do it, even handicapped as I was by my own lack of confidence. Sure enough, eventually I was writing blogs like these in what to me is Insight Meditation. Or, put another way, I was able to take pure Insight Meditation and mix it with conceptuality (relative truths) and produce something like a transformative result that was very clear to me, if perhaps to no one else.

Now, that was years ago. Since then, I have been gradually increasing the embrace of Insight Meditation farther and wider

to be ever more inclusive. And, it is working. Where I am at now, I have realized my immediate goal of writing in that state and most anything else I can think of. I can't say for certain, yet it seems like I am reaching a plateau where everything (or most everything) I turn my attention to is grist for the Insight Meditation/Mahamudra mill, so to speak.

Anything I turn my mind to leans down to meet me halfway and is fuel for the fire, so it seems. However, this has been a long and arduous journey that has taken many years to accomplish. It seems to me (knock on wood) that I am pretty well-rounded at this point. I don't have any great peaks to climb and this form of meditation is approaching the form of a clean-running machine, good for what?

Well, that is what I plan to find out.

ROUNDING OFF THE CORNERS OF THE MIND

August 18, 2019

[This is what I call a ramble, when I am a bit in the zone, perhaps given to what is almost automatic writing, just sharing the present moment with my FB friends. So, you non-retirees can ignore this post and get on with your business at hand and those of us with a little more time (yet perhaps less of it) can walk together.]

With me, it's almost like there is no place in life for sleep anymore. This is not to say that I don't sleep, but rather more that I seem to resent the interruption in what I'm doing that sleep requires. I would rather just keep monitoring my mind as I tend (and like) to do.

If you imagine I'm engaged in some great project, you would be wrong. It's not like that. I'm often fishing for or just open to topics of focus, yet it does not take much to satisfy my interest. And that's because I'm not dwelling so much on the content, but more on their shared nature. I can see, as I write this, that what I mean to say here is hard to put into words. It's almost like when swimming in the lake, the waves I make by my effort to swim, always seem to push the innertube just beyond my reach.

Sometimes, as I write what I intend, when it is written, I see that what I thought I was pigeonholing, I've only embroidered around the edges and never made a dent in the heart of what I mean to say. It's like catching a moth in the hands. I catch it and look, but it's not there. I didn't catch it.

I write and write and write and yet the heart of meaning sheds my writing like a snake its skin. I end up writing around the point or my writing ends up only leading up to the main point but not expressing it. The heart of the topic is illusive and still seems to have not yet been expressed and is yet to be written. I try to write the point of what I'm writing, but can't. That's a sign of something. LOL. This does not always happen. Often, I can express what I mean to say, at least well enough for my own satisfaction which is why I write in the first place.

Yet, there have been certain topics that have eluded me all these years, topics which while trying to define only sends them scooting into the future, while what I succeed in writing once-again just misses the target. I don't know why this is so or what is special about these elusive issues that they cannot be defined. They continue to exist undefined, while I'm left holding the bag, so to speak, a bag containing only a shell and no content; an exercise in futility.

To repeat myself, most topics do not behave this way; only a few do and I can't help but wonder why these few topics have nine lives, so to speak. They can't be executed, so they must hold a piece of the future for me that lives on beyond the present, no matter how I try to conclude them. I don't expect readers to understand, because I don't even understand why these particular topics are ever-elusive. Perhaps someone reading this knows and can explain.

Anyway, those special topics are anomalies, while most of what I write is very straight-forward. And, I'm taken by the efficiency of it all, how almost anything is grist for the mill of meditation, combustible fuel that, phoenix-like, I rise (or continue) from the ashes of. I like burning through fuel like this. Like a carburetor, It mixes the pure non-dualism of Insight Meditation with anything that occurs in the mind, a thought, words, concepts, emotions and sometimes even some kleshas. It's not unlike a bug-zapper, consuming thoughts as they arise and converting concepts through the realization of their nature.

My point here, which is where I started out, is that it's often hard for me to call it a day and try to sleep and I'm not always able to make it past the threshold into actual rest. In that condition, I have to get back up again and do something until I am tired enough to make the transition to sleep.

And so, to reiterate: I'm not doing anything of any importance, but just being aware of what arises in the mind and that's enough to keep me gainfully occupied and awake. I am working on learning to take my state of mind to bed with me and have clarity in sleep, yet that seems to be still just a little out of reach. Yet, I can see it is coming. Things tend to equalize in the long run.

In some sense I am like a burner that can consume anything that comes along, almost indiscriminately, meaning without examining it. I guess the dharma texts would say, as mentioned, I am looking at the nature of thoughts that arise and not their content. And seeing the nature of a thought, it vanishes or ceases to be a concern or focus. And the entire process of appearances arising and vanishing is clear and lucid, a seamless process. Maybe I can sleep now. Thanks for walking with me a spell. LOL.

IF YOU ARE IN A HURRY YOU WILL NEVER GET THERE

August 19, 2019

However, a few leaps may be required! It's time for a little remedial check on how we are doing. From what I gather from your comments, it is easy to confuse understanding dharma with experiencing dharma. And, more difficult yet to distinguish dharma experience from the actual realization of dharma. So, let's review.

I also am modifying my approach on FB; that is at the end of this blog.

Understanding is what words and concepts engender and those words point at, to my understanding, the senses and experience itself. However, there is a gulf between concepts and experience that we may not want (or be able) to cross. No matter what we do or think, each of us is going to have experience of one kind or another, even if we try to avoid it. So, it's important, IMO, to understand and recognize experience as it arises.

Experience is simple. It comes and goes. If we are telling someone (even ourselves) about something we went through, it's obviously an experience and not a realization. We no longer have it! Realizations are forever. We never lose them and still have them. Experiences, as mentioned, come and go. We may be up today, but we may be down tomorrow, or next week, or next month. You never know.

So, if we are savoring what we are going through and it is not constant, but waxes and wanes, then it's an experience, not a realization. I can't count the number of times I have met with Rinpoche and told him of a powerful dream or experience I have had, only for him to say to me (in so many words) that it was just an experience I was having and not realization. Keep on practicing is what he always says. Keep going. That kind of popped a balloon or two for me. LOL.

Our spiritual experiences or "highs" are special to us, of course, but they too often just become another obstacle to

weigh us down. It's like a baby taking his or her first breath and holding it. The doctor has to spank its butt to get it breathing. It is the same with spiritual experiences that we get attached to. We attempt to hold on to them instead of letting them go, so that we could perhaps have another. Spiritually speaking, if that is the case, we can't breathe and life will eventually have to knock that wind out of us, so that we let go of that breath and breathe in again.

My point is that spiritual growth (and even attainment) is a process and not a state that, like breathing, must continue. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. Attachment to a special spiritual experience is a sure way to not have another, and holding that breath gets real stale after a while, especially if you are forever telling it to others and yourself. Not a good sign. LOL.

And so, if your spiritual state and its experience waxes and wanes like the moon, goes up and down, it is not realization, but experience. Important experience, yes, perhaps, but experience none the less. The pith dharma texts clearly state that "In the midst of experience, realization may arise." That too can happen, but not unless we are open to it and spiritually breathing, IMO.

And so, we must be careful not to let others shine us on and, even more careful, to not shine ourselves on. If we want to believe that what are experiences are realization, few will tell us otherwise. Why bother? If we are not truthful to ourselves, the cart is already before the horse and we are not going anywhere.

We have to take our time to progress spiritually. As the title of this blog says, if you are in a hurry, you will never get there. And this especially is true if we are attached to our deepest spiritual experiences and holding our breath. If our experience goes up and down, as mentioned, it is an experience and not realization.

And this is of particular importance to those who are sure that, as bright as they are, they can game the system. They don't need an authentic guru because they can do it alone. In fact, they feel they are already doing it. My only comment to these folks is "Good Luck with that!"

I felt that way myself many decades ago. I had put together a patchwork quilt of spiritual understanding that only was missing a few patches or so I thought. Well, maybe a few more were missing than that. I would push on and finish that quilt by my lonesome. It was conspicuous but the holes in it.

This even persisted when I finally first met the rinpoche I have worked with for almost 40 years. I carefully explained to him (through a translator) that I had been an astrologer for many years and had worked spiritually very hard. I thought that perhaps I could place out of Meditation 101 and start a little higher up the ladder. And Rinpoche, as kind as he is, then carefully explained to me that he could see that I had never harmed anyone with my astrology, but in this case, when it comes to meditation, he felt that I had to start at the beginning, at that very first step, so to speak.

Well, folks, I had to think about that a bit, whether I wanted to go to the back of the line, so to speak. LOL. However, I had great confidence in Rinpoche from the moment I met him and so I humbled my stupid Self and started at the very beginning. And that has made all the difference. As for Realization, more perhaps tomorrow. As for this blog:

On this daily blog I am happy to support your spiritual experiences on the topic at hand, providing there are questions and discussion. If you just want to make non-topic-related statements, best to do that on your own blog. Here it is my wish to have questions and discussion. I will do my best to post a theme or topic for you to comment on and together we discuss it.

There are precious few questions of late, but that will change over time. I thank those of you who are able to jump in and have discussions. It is important to have a dialog on these issues. I never had that luxury

BLADE RUNNER: TESTING FOR AUTHENTICITY

August 20, 2019

This blog may be a reach, perhaps a bridge too far for some, perhaps not, but I'm going to try for it anyway because (at least IMO) this kind of understanding is important.

It has to do with how we can tell whether a person that could be a dharma teacher for us is authentic. Do they have actual realization? In many cases, their reputation precedes them, but that does not guarantee that they are right for us. Years ago, I spent personal time with the Dalai Lama and he was wonderful, yet nothing ever clicked. Sure, if we can read auras really well, that might help, yet, in my experience, "all that glitters is not gold." LOL.

And, while we can look for realization in the form of a halo or a nimbus around the person's head, fakers probably find that easy to emulate. A better bet is to examine a prospective dharma teacher carefully in everything they do, including the nitty-gritty of their personality and the Self. Are they coherent? Does everything about them all hang together? And let me explain that, at least how I do it.

Again: How do I tell if the dharma person I'm meeting and talking to has dharma-realization enough to help me prepare to recognize the true nature of the mind? It's not always that easy and the process reminds me very much of Richard Deckhard (Harrison Ford) in the original movie of "Blade Runner," where Deckard used what was called a Voight-Kampff test to determine "replicants (androids), which was a very complex test consisting of various questions and the coherence in the answers that come back.

Or, another way of saying this might be that a realized person (to whatever degree they are realized) presents with their mind and actions something that coheres (is coherent) or is inherently aligned in a way a non-realized person does not. Here is an analogy I found useful, Try it on:

Imagine a large number of fish swimming in the ocean or lake. In the case of a person with some realization, like the blade-runner's questions, that group of fish suddenly "school" so that all the fish point in the same direction. With a non-realized person, the orientation of the fish is pretty much random.

That's a complex image, I agree, but quite an accurate description in my experience. The school of fish refers to whatever the prospective teacher says and how they act. Does everything they do somehow cohere and stand out – school? I find it does if there is realization. IMO, everything an authentic teacher says wakes us up a bit, if we listen carefully.

A realized person exhibits a consistency and certainty that non-realized people, IMO, do not. All the parts of their knowledge are coherent; they cohere and it all fits together (their actions, comments, words, etc.) like pieces in a natural puzzle. In other words, like fish that suddenly school, their every action all points in the same direction, in this case, toward realization of the dharma. That coherent-clarity and lucidity (somehow) is detectable (or perhaps sensed) by those who are looking for an authentic teacher. It may not work for you; I can't say.

I'm a musician, so I have found that I can also hear the consistency (the realization) in a person's voice. When I scan the voice (and what is being said by a dharma teacher), there is what I would call a coherent hologram that arises (which I sense) and it comes into view through all the words, comments, ideas, and what-not. I find that sort of hologram or image to be a good sign. LOL. I don't know if others can do this.

Yet, all the above are just signs. Let's not forget just feeling a connection with a proposed dharma teacher.

More important (and this is something anyone can do) and this is also another way I know when I have found an authentic dharma teacher; I find myself learning from the individual. It is that simple. They may be a pauper or a prince. That does not matter. It only matters that I am able to learn dharma from them and find that they expand my own realization of the dharma.

NO POT TO PISS IN

August 21, 2019

A favorite analogy I refer to is that of rushing into a cow pasture and ending up tiptoeing back out. I like it because it highlights how delicate life and our actions are. I didn't grasp this as I was coming up, when I was like a bull in a china shop. Only later, as I grew older, did I begin to grasp the effects of karma and realize the possible result of my every action, thus watching where I step as I tiptoe back out of the cow pasture. As they say, too soon old, too late smart.

If I mix that idea with the holograph image of the emptiness of all appearances of any substantial being; and the combination becomes more like a high-wire act, with me suspended a mile high halfway across the wire, not to mention the attendant vertigo.

As my first dharma teacher used to say to me, over and over, "Michael, I've got no pot to piss in," by which he meant there was no one or place he could unload. He could but take it. The expression that was coincident with the above statement was when he said "This is it!" Or, he sometimes even would say "This is hell, and we each have to make our little heaven in a corner of it." With that he denoted that Samsara and Nirvana were connate, the two sides of the same coin.

When we grasp the meaning of connate and understand that realization and enlightenment are not states or places that we can eventually escape to from the Samsara we are now in, then we naturally have to (or had better) slow down. When we understand that Nirvana, the same Nirvana that in Zen I used to imagine was somewhere out there for me, is nothing more than realized Samsara. We are not going ANYWHERE.

When that sinks in, there comes a pause in our escape-velocity, and we begin to circle back and around to where we are now, with thoughts of renovation and remediation in mind. In other words, we have to pretty-up Samsara because that's exactly where we are going to remain. There is no back door (or front door) to Samsara. We are just in it. And there is no

escape from dealing with the mess we are in. Now, that is a concept that I find compelling. LOL.

It's like this polluted world we all live in today. When we run out of virgin territory, no more westward territory, there comes a pause and thoughts about refreshing where we are at. I'm hoping you get the idea here.

When this connate-ness of Samsara and Nirvana comes home to us so that we grasp it, then perhaps ideas of composting, recycling, renewal, and the like make more sense. In my salad days, when I was full of piss and vinegar, I penned the line: "Call what carriage as you may, your hearse." That said it all to me back then.

And so, as I grow older I come to such thoughts (as the above) more easily and frequently. They are enough to give me pause. And the idea of that straight line that was busy going somewhere, well... Another line I penned for my own amusement decades ago is "The straighter the line, the finer the curve." It always, always, always comes back around and is cyclic... and spirals too.

And so, when life begins to essentially repeat itself and our intended linear trajectory turns into a curve that circles back like a torpedo, something more than straight-line thinking is required of us. It is then that the spring in our step or gait slows to placing one step in front of the other, much like we are in the middle of the tightrope mentioned earlier. Careful does it or as the Tibetans say "Kal-ē, Kal-ē, Kal-ē, which means "Slowly, Slowly, Slowly."

DHARMA GYROSCOPE

August 22, 2019

“Pick up your bed, Lazarus, and walk.” Some days, that’s about all I can do. As I always say to my kids as advice, just put one foot in front of the other and keep walking. I give the same advice to myself, because these days have been just doozies. LOL.

I won’t bother reciting the litany of events that I find bothersome just now, since what do they matter? It’s true, these impending conditions can weigh heavy on my mind, yet I have been there and (as they say) done that, so pausing or dwelling on the heaviness is not a good idea; it just prolongs it all. LOL. Walk on!

A godsend or, rather, a Buddha-send, is what I call my dharma gyroscope, the inertial navigation system that has been created through dharma practice. It keeps me upright when otherwise I could be bent low by a succession (like waves on the beach) of unwelcome events. There are times when the difficult just keep rolling in.

My reactivity or lack thereof is so crucial. I can’t stop unwelcome events from piling up, sometimes day after day, yet I can work on my reaction to them. How I react to tough times is entirely up to me. I learned this years ago when I realized that there is something completely fresh and pristine about our reactions.

If we are lazy or feel-too-much the rote-ness of daily life, our reactions are always “Jim Dandy to the rescue!” for those who are old enough to know who “Jim Dandy” is. As dark or dull as life can get, our reactions always are spontaneous and of the immediate moment. If we are looking to pick up the thread of continuity (where we can continue from), our knee-jerk reactions are the quick of where we are at, IMO. You can count on them, every single time.

Reactions are the trail of breadcrumbs that dharma leaves for us to follow, if we will just pick up on them as they surface. IMO, if nothing else is present, there is no more faithful guide to keep us going in the direction of our dharma path than our

ever-present reactivity. And the most amazing thing about reactions, to my mind, is that they are always of the moment, instantaneous, and so very fresh.

When I sometimes cast about for the thread of the dharma in my day-to-day life, and forget how to best use my life meaningfully, my own reactions will always show me the way. In the sometimes dullness of where I find myself stuck, my instantaneous reactions will always light the way forward.

I have written about what I call “Reactivity Tong-Len” for years, so I’m not saying much in this blog about the technique, but you are free to read about it here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

The main idea is, as mentioned, learning to recognize our knee-jerk reactions (or even very small reactions), acknowledge that the reaction is 100% our own, and then just drop-it and let it go. Awareness of them is enough. That’s all that needs to be done. Just as our reactions are (at least initially) unlimited, so is the energy gained back by recognizing them as they arise, owning them, and dropping them. That’s all there is to it, but if these reactions are practiced “religiously,” all of that wasted energy we spend reacting to this, that, and the other thing is reclaimed. And by recognition, we gradually stop reacting.

If you will bother to note your moment-to-moment reactions, you will see for yourself how they obscure the mind. And it can be anything, a reaction to seeing someone we “don’t like,” that ugly tie he wears, or the thought of the bills that have to be paid. It is endless and our own reactions are the most fertile ground for reclamation of energy I know of.

Once we take control of our reactions and automatically respond appropriately (instead of just react), it is like a dharma gyroscope that keeps us upright and impervious to being pushed this way or that by fate or whatever.

THE LAST TRUTH

August 23, 2019

[Every so often, we have to contact the Mothership. LOL.]

I used to tell myself that “truth” is what remains when everything else fades away. It’s the last to go. And that word “last” has many interesting meanings, if you look it up. Another way to say the same thing is that the truth is the future, because it will last until then.

If something is made with great care, such as a Stradivarius violin or even a sentence well-written, it will better withstand the shocks outbreaking in life and, like the truth, last longer than something poorly put together. Witness the stars in the night sky.

For example, the writings of William Shakespeare have withstood the combined ears of centuries to fathom its depth. As we read Shakespeare aloud to ourselves, before we reach the level or place where Shakespeare was at when he worked his words, we are caught, captivated, and lost in a trancelike sleep in which so clear a bell is ringing. His words just knock us out. That says something.

Over fifty years ago, as a youth, I wrote the following words, what I call a “mantra poem,” which, when recited aloud re-creates in the mind an entity very much like what Shakespeare did. I warn readers that such language as this, by necessity, skirts the edge of sense, and that’s also where nonsense naturally exists. And it is at that very edge that the words give up their truth. Here is a poem about what the esotericists call the “Monad,” a singularity and vehicle of time/space that infinitely exists (but does not), like a holograph, such that some of us wake and care for others as they sleep. Perhaps, in dharma lingo, it would tell the story of the Bodhisattva and Bodhicitta.

EVERLASTING LIFE

What will in words not wake,
Clear sleeps,
And clear, sleeps on.

What wakes stands watch to see that sleep as sound.
What wakes will serve to set asleep,
Inset a sleep with standing words,
That wake, if ever, last.
And on that "last," in overlay, our life.
Yes, to lay at the last a life that ever lives,
To ever "last" that last of life,
And in ever lasting life, everlasting,
We have a life that lives at last.

ALBUM RELEASE: THE PRIME MOVERS BLUES BAND

August 24, 2019

[I knew this album was coming, but I did not know exactly when. Then, to my surprise a box of vinyl copies of this double album showed up today. I am told that the CD is still being readied for release. I'm not sure where you will be able to get it, but here is what it looks like. I wrote the liner notes for it (see below) and chose all the photos, given some suggestions as to what they wanted. I include the liner notes version that I have on hand and am not sure this was the final edit, but here it is.]

Album liner-notes by Michael Erlewine

It's hard to say exactly where the idea for the Prime Movers Blues Band came from. I was into the folk-music scene of the later 1950s and early 1960s, almost always as a sidekick, a kind of a Forrest Gump sort of bystander.

I traveled with a young Bob Dylan; we hitchhiked together in the spring of 1961 and I helped to put on a concert in Ann Arbor for Dylan around that time and so on. I can remember sitting around the cafe at the Michigan Union with Dylan, waiting for the review of the concert he did the night before. We were smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. Around 10:30 AM, the review of the concert in The Michigan Daily newspaper came out. The review was good. Dylan was happy; he grabbed his guitar and backpack; he was soon hitchhiking out of town heading somewhere.

Everyone hitchhiked back then. If I remember right, I probably hitchhiked from Ann Arbor to NYC something like ten times, not to mention all the way to the West Coast and back as well. We were all part of what back then was called the folk-circuit; a route from Cambridge to NYC to Ann Arbor to Chicago to Madison to Berkeley and back around. We either hitchhiked it or got an old jalopy and drove. This was all part of what was called the folk-revival of that time. So, there was all that.

However, probably what influenced me most was the year I spent in Berkeley, California in 1964; it really imprinted me and left its mark. There was so much going on there, not to mention that it was in Berkeley that I dropped acid for the first time and that altered my mind forever. Not in the way we all feared (like it could wreck our brain), but LSD altered how I saw the world and that was a realization; we can't walk a realization back any more than we can put the toothpaste back in the tube. I came back from that year in Berkeley changed forever as to how I saw life. The effects of LSD were happening all over the country.

It was in the late summer of 1965 that my brother Daniel and I formed the Prime Movers band, a name I came up with. Little did we know that same year (and summer) out in San Francisco the Grateful Dead were forming. It seemed to me that change was in the air everywhere. In my own heart of hearts, I credit the generation change called "The Sixties" to LSD and how it changed how young folks my age saw things.

At first, the band was just an idea my brother Dan and I had. Daniel was a guitar player, who later became a guitar maker and probably the best-known guitar repairman on the planet. He still is today.

And then there was my good friend Robert Sheff, who was an accomplished musician on keyboards. He could read an orchestral score on sight with something like 15 or more staves to it. Robert was soon to be known (as he is today) as an avant-garde classical musician: "Blue" Gene Tyranny. As for a rhythm section (bass and drums), in the beginning we had a friend of my brother Dan, Michael Wynn, on drums (known to us as "Spider") and our cousin Robert Vinopal ("R.T.") on bass.

Looking back, over the years I believe we had something like 37 players pass through the band, not to mention a bunch of short timers. And so, it was not long before the band shuffled off Spider and R.T., replacing them with Jack Dawson (a music school student at the University of Michigan) on bass and a young James Osterberg (today known as Iggy Pop) on drums.

Now, there have been various stories about where the name “Iggy” came from, so let’s get that straight. And the truth is very simple. James Osterberg came to the Prime Movers Blues Band from a local frat band around town called The Iguanas. We had no interest (and perhaps not enough respect) for frat bands, so when Jim Osterberg joined the Prime Movers, we wanted to remind him where he came from, so we called him “Iguana” for a while, until (to our satisfaction) he had paid his dues. That was soon shortened to “Iggy” and it just stuck. Jim liked the name too.

I know that Iggy Pop is famous today and he deserves all the credit he gets and especially because he walked a fine line between stardom and being a regular guy. I admire Iggy for doing just that, not selling out, but working his music out as he has done. Now, another question I get about Iggy is, could he play drums?

The short answer is “Yes.” Iggy worked real hard to learn blues drumming. Early on, we heard the first drummer for the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Sam Lay, do something called the “double shuffle.” It was some really down drumming and very hard to do. Not everyone could. Well, Iggy worked day and night for weeks to master the double shuffle and he did. So, Iggy became a very good blues drummer.

One last question I get about Iggy a lot is how was he with the ladies? All I can say, with his long eyelashes and muscular build, they loved him. Iggy never had to lift a finger. He was not macho or alpha; he was just Iggy and women followed him everywhere.

Early on, as we made the Ann Arbor music scene, we got connected with a local promoter and band manager name Jeep Holland. Jeep handled a number of bands, one of which was “The Rationals,” a great local band and good friends with our band. Holland was a great music collector (mostly albums and old 45s), but he was not much fun to hang out with, and none of our band liked him a lot.

One reason is that Jeep Holland wanted to make a rock n’ roll band out of us and put us on the teen circuit. We tried that and did our best to fit in. We never did care for that scene and, as we came to like Jeep less, we fit in less. We had no

interest in wearing any kind of matching outfits or doing anything other than playing the kind of music we liked to play. We did get regular men's suits and even wore ties for a while, but that too got old fast. So, our time with Jeep Holland was more brief than anything else and we were soon just out on our own.

We did have one near-fame experience with a subsidiary of Motown records who heard us play and liked it. Before we knew it, they came up from Detroit and drove us around in their big limousines, talking us up and doing nice things for us. An example of a nice thing was arranging for my brother Dan and I to have lunch with the Everly Brothers. There we were having lunch with Don and Phil Everly. WOW! Who does not like the Everly Brothers?!

However, beyond the talk and the hype of the Motown folks was something a little more sinister. When it came down to where the rubber meets the road, it turned out that they wanted a white band to play Black music. Fine by us because all we did play was Black music, mostly the blues. Yet, like so many things in life, there was caveat or "twist" to their offer. They wanted us to play Black music that they would feed to us. We would have nothing to say about what we played. All we could say to that was: "What?"

Well, that was just a no-go for us, at least for me. I did not want to be told what to play and we refused and that was the end of the limousines. That was probably our one chance at fame, but I've never regretted it. We liked to play what we liked to play and that's all there was to it. We had no interest in being their shill for music we couldn't care less about. And I should make something clear.

Personally, I never wanted to be famous and on tour. What I wanted most was to play blues and study Black music. We were always in homage to the great blues players. That's where I was the happiest. What wonderful musicians the great blues players were back then.

And so, we played around Ann Arbor, Michigan and the surrounding Midwest area, with occasional trips to Chicago and elsewhere. We played bars, frats, and any kind of gig we

could get. We even were hired to play at a polka place and were paid to leave.

We did end up with a fairly regular gig at a Black bar called Clint's Club down on Ann Arbor's one-block of Black-owned businesses. We typically played at Clint's Club from Thursday through Sunday each week. I think we made \$35 a night for the entire band. We were doing Chicago-style electric blues for an older Black audience, while right next door was another bar for younger Black folks. They were all into soul music (rhythm & blues) and were embarrassed that a white band was playing for their elders just next door. It was like that.

Sometimes, we would play at Clint's Club from 9:30 PM until 2:00 AM and then break down the equipment and go across town to a teen nightclub called the Fifth Dimension and set up and play there until dawn. Acts like Jimi Hendrix and The Who played there. By dawn, all we could do was go out to a restaurant and pig out. We were beat.

Or, another story: we got a week-long gig in Grand Rapids, Michigan at a place that I think was called the Blue Note or something like that. We were to stay in a bare-bones upstairs apartment over the club. However, when we pulled into the parking lot, there was a huge banner hanging above that place that said "The Prime Movers: The Junior Walker Music." This was a shock because of course we knew of Junior Walker and the All-Stars but had never played any of their tunes.

We had to run out, buy an album and learn some tunes before that night. Luckily, we had two horns in the band and by show-time we were playing tunes like "Shotgun," "Road Runner," and "Shake and Fingerpop." That's the kind of crazy stuff that happened back then.

Mostly we studied and played the blues. Ann Arbor is only about four hours from Chicago, the city with the most electric blues, so various band members (sometimes the whole band) would go to Chicago to hang out and look through the local record bins for old blues 45s. Our main contact there was Bob Koester, who owned the Jazz Records Mart and founded Delmark Records, where he produced some of the greatest

blues recordings ever, albums like Junior Wells' Hoodoo Man Blues and Magic Sam's West Side Soul.

Koester not only put us up, but took us down to the south and west side of Chicago where we saw the great blues artists play live in the clubs, players like Little Walter, Junior Wells, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Magic Sam, and many others. For us, this was like going to heaven.

Our familiarity with the Chicago blues and its artists served us well a few years later when the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival was announced for August of 1969. We didn't help form the festival, but we couldn't help but be involved. After all, we were the local blues band and we ended up providing food and liquor to all the performers, and there were scores of them between the headliners and their bands.

We served all our blues heroes food and especially drinks, which made us very popular. We set up a bar, working out of my dad's station wagon. We were blown away to be talking with and serving all these blues heroes – scores of them. And it was more than that.

The performers for that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival started pouring into town as much as a week early. I have no idea why, perhaps they had no other place to go. The university put them up in various dorms and at the Michigan League. Here were these incredible beings like Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, Big Mama Thornton, and many others staying in these little rooms with nothing else to do.

We could go and just hang out with them, in these tiny dorm rooms, sitting at the foot of their beds. I remember my brother Dan and I going up to Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's room with a bottle of Jack Daniel's one night. Crudup came to the door, a giant of a man. Dan just opened his coat to reveal the bottle of Jack Daniel's and Crudup just said "Come on in boys!" We stayed up late drinking. Crudup wrote Elvis Presley's first song. And we did this another night with Big Mama Thornton (where Presley got "Hound Dog" from) and others. Now, that was a time.

As for drugs and stuff, we never got lost in the hard drugs. Mostly it was alcohol and pot. I remember that we had a pound of lousy marijuana under the floorboards in our attic, a

big house where most of the band lived. It was known as the Prime Mover's house. We smoked every last fiber of that pot.

I can remember one night when we had some good pot. We were playing on the teen circuit up on a stage and we were high. I looked across at my brother Dan who was just as high. Our eyes met in the middle of the tune and I swear that neither of us had the slightest idea as to what the next chord we were supposed to play was. Not a clue. But, sure enough, in the slowness of that expanded time, we always managed to find it.

And so it went. In the summer of 1967, the "Summer of Love," our five-piece band (and a friend) jumped into our van and drove all the way to San Francisco. I can remember waking up as we crossed the Continental Divide and found that we were surrounded by a flock of sheep.

In San Francisco, we knew practically no one and had no place to stay. Our friend Michael Bloomfield, lead guitar for the Butterfield Blues band, took care of us. He found us a place to practice and sleep in the Sausalito heliport. To eat, we played for meals at a little Black-owned rib-joint in Sausalito.

And we played or auditioned at many of the San Francisco clubs, the Avalon Ballroom, The Matrix, The Straight Theater, The Height A, as well as across the bay in Berkeley. As it turned out, Michael Bloomfield asked us to fill in at the Fillmore Auditorium for their band The Electric Flag, which we did. We opened for Cream (Eric Clapton, Ginger Baker, and Jack Bruce) at one of the first times they played the Fillmore. We watched them shoot up speed in the green room. I had a shouting match with Bill Graham as to how our amps were to be set up. Now, that was a time.

We also sat in and jammed with Jerry Garcia and opened for groups like The Contours, The Shangri-Las, and others. I remember one night sitting around with Janis Joplin drinking whiskey at the Grande Ballroom in Detroit. She drank most of the whiskey. By the early 1970s, the band had shrunk down to just odd gigs with my brother Dan and myself (The Erlewine Brothers). And finally, it was just me playing my little Wurlitzer piano and singing in bars. About that time, I got

married and have been married almost 48 years. I've got four kids and eight grandkids. A number of my kids are musicians.

And that's a brief history. My brother Dan, who made guitars for folks like Jerry Garcia and Albert King, became the best known guitar repairman out there, Robert Sheff, now known as "Blue" Gene Tyranny is a famous avant-garde classical composer, Jack Dawson is playing music somewhere on the West Coast, and Jim Osterberg, as you all know, became Iggy Pop and is alive and well today.

And Iggy was not our only drummer. When Iggy became Iggy Pop, we hooked up with J.C. Crawford, "Jessie" to us, and he was a fine drummer. Later J.C. became the so called "Religious Leader and Spiritual Advisor" for the MC5 and it was J.C. who made the "Kick out the jams, motherfuckers" famous. In later years, our bass player became Ilene Silverman, a lady who could really play the blues.

As for me, I founded and created the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com), the largest collection of albums, sidemen, discographies, biographies and other data on the planet. I also did the same with movies, documenting all movies from the beginning up to now (All-Movie Guide).

For those who would like to read more about the Prime Movers Blues Band (and see lots of photos), please see the excellent web site by Bruno Ceriotti, who is the official historian of the group at this link:

<http://brunoceriotti.weebly.com/the-prime-movers.html>

THE VANISHING POINT: WE CAN'T SEE OR BE SEEN

August 25, 2019

A good “thought-provoker” is to consider that you and I cannot see beyond where we are at now, and this by the definition of our limitations, in particular because of our filter of attachments and the limitations (or lack) of our realization. In other words, we can’t see above our “pay grade,” so to speak. If someone is more “realized” dharmically than we are, how would we know? LOL. As they say, we lack the faculty to see the phenomenon.

And to make things worse, the reverse is also true. If you have gone where others have yet to go, you can count on and know that they cannot see you, and for the same reason given above. They lack the faculty (in this case, “realization”) to identify us and where we are at. To them, we are invisible. So, this is a double-blind.

In other words, we can look down at someone who is now at where we once were, but it does not work the other way around. We can’t see beyond what we ourselves have realized, not to mention the burden of our filter of fixations and attachments. As mentioned, this is a double-blind; we can’t see beyond ourselves and, by the same token, those more realized than ourselves can’t be seen by us. In that way, we are flying with no compass.

This is why it is so difficult for those of us seeking to find an authentic dharma teacher, because we can’t identify what we don’t ourselves know. And, similarly, if we transition and reach some form of realization, we might then get the blessing of an authentic dharma teacher (because he or she can see us), but to everyone else we are, practically speaking, invisible. It’s into the slipstream we go.

We might as well be a ghost as far as being seen or recognized. LOL. And so, dharma realization is a vanishing point as far as others are concerned.

It’s just the way things are.

THE CLIFF-NOTES ON EMPTINESS

August 26, 2019

[A little long, perhaps, but could be useful to those interested in the concept of emptiness. Am packing to go to the monastery for a two weeks Mahamudra intensive.]

There are several dharma words that when translated to English have proved to be problematical. One of them is the word “Suffering” and another is the word “Emptiness.” Here, let’s work on “emptiness.” I will save “Suffering” for another blog, as it is even more elusive. Here I will attempt to touch on some of the issues around the concept of emptiness.

It’s unfortunate that the words “empty” and “emptiness” are confused or, if not confused, they very much share a Venn diagram. Each can be (and is) used in the place of the other. An example of this in dharma-use is the concept of “emptiness” as a lack of substantial being (sometimes called a sense of nothingness) and another is the word “empty,” like an empty cup. And yet, there are all kinds of dharma teachings with titles “Empty of Self” and “Empty of Other,” where it’s easy for westerners to slip back into the idea of emptiness as just an empty cup that we must somehow fill.

And yet, the concept of emptiness is key to understand in dharma study. “Emptiness,” as used in dharma literature, is not empty like we say that a glass of water is empty. Well, what then is “emptiness” empty of? In dharma, “Emptiness” is empty of permanent existence or what we call permanent “being” as in having an overarching permanent Soul and Self. In Buddhism, we don’t. For many westerners, the lack of a permanent soul is a deal-breaker because we were brought up with having a Soul as our only hope for immortality. LOL. The dharma is very disappointing on this issue, but they have reasons.

In the pith dharma teachings, life is said to be completely empty of a permanent reality of eternal or permanent being, just as a movie we watch is empty of actual reality. We see and experience the movie and we realize it is not real. The dharma points out that our life here on Earth is just another

dream we are having or movie we are watching, one where we see, experience, and feel, yet we have yet to awaken and realize its essential unreality. That's what the Dharma accomplishes, awakening in the middle of our own dream. And this presupposes that there is something to wake up to.

Perhaps each of us can sense this "emptiness" of actual permanency in life (this impermanence), because we endlessly seem to reify what we think is important to us, try to make it even more important or real than it is or, as they used to say, we "gild the lily," when it already is as real as it is ever going to get. Reification is a major source of what obscures the mind.

If we somehow feel this emptiness in life, which has sometimes in the west been called ennui or world-weariness, which is what they say is the stuff that youth is made of. The Germans had a whole genre for this kind of fiction that they called Bildungsroman, self-building novels. And there are endless movies out there about trying to fill this emptiness that we feel inside. It's there because of reification and fixation that tries to make life more real than it actually is.

So, we could say that existence is a case of "Being Lite," somehow we have less being than we imagine we should or that we have reified for ourselves, but even that is stretching the truth. Just as a movie has no direct reality whatsoever, not even a light-case of reality, but absolutely none at all, so what we call our "being" has no permanent reality whatsoever. And yet, here we are, a walking holograph, empty of permanence, but not of appearance

Can we say that this being that we don't have is "becoming," meaning that eventually whatever this emptiness we feel inside is going to be filled and turn into being? No, we can't even say that our being is becoming, other than perhaps as used in the old connotation of the word "becoming," where folks would say something like "What a becoming dress she has," meaning attractive. That we can say, because obviously that's what reification is all about, making something more important, attractive, or real than it actually is. We're all about that. Our imagining that being is actually becoming (to come) into existence is as rare as, or so the Tibetans say, the horns of a rabbit or daytime stars. It's not happening.

And so, our being (as much as we would like it to be) is not becoming, as in on the verge of reality and becoming more real. My advice to myself has always been to examine the use of “emptiness” in dharma with mindfulness, so that the meaning of that word does not, like a magnet, pick up all kinds of misdirection and bad-pointers along the way to understanding. Because of our habitual use of the word “empty” in English, that meaning is hard to shake.

For example, when the pith teachings say that appearances are empty, they don’t mean that appearances are empty like a bowl can be empty and that appearance can eventually be filled up. No, that will never happen, because what they mean is that all appearances are themselves the emptiness itself arising or appearing to us, much like a hologram.

Emptiness and appearances, in Tibetan lingo, are connate, meaning that they are the two sides of a coin. In other words, the appearances all around us right now are not only empty (here I am using, like a bowl is empty) of permanent being; appearances are itself the emptiness-of-being arising as in a holograph – an illusion.

We might ask, where did this idea of permanent “Being” ever come from, if there is no reality to it? It’s not that there is just “nothing” as far as appearances go, because look around you; here we are! And rampant materialism is nothing more than reification gone mad, desperately trying to make life more real than it in truth is, instead of realizing what is called emptiness, the lack or emptiness of any permanent being like a Self (which has always been the fact) and being content with that. If we can’t learn to see beyond that, we will (as a society) live in fear of death.

Materialism is like an image I have imagined since I was a youth, an image of a mass of naked-people trying to stay afloat in a very deep lake, climbing on top of one another to get ahead and sinking all the time. I don’t know where that image came from, but there it is. That’s materialism and reification to my mind. LOL. I was just a kid! I include a drawing I made back in 1960, when I thought I was going to be a painter-artist. LOL.

As the title of this blog pointed out, this is just a Cliff-Notes introduction to the dharma concept of emptiness. To me, the word is like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where we had to very carefully take apart a pile of sticks, one by one. Both the image of “empty” and “emptiness” are already fully in use and are even substituted for one another.

As mentioned, what I find useful is not falling into thinking of emptiness as a container from which something is now missing, one that can eventually be filled up. Rather, “Emptiness” is this holographic set of appearances that we call life that are as real now as they ever have been throughout history and time. These appearances are enough in themselves and are not meant to be a chimera or mirage for a more permanent Soul that we hunger after and endlessly attempt to fill. This life is impermanent and ephemeral, and that precludes any kind of permanent Self or Oversoul that we construct or might like to imagine.

The good news is here we are, have always been, and will always be until every last bit of the karma that we bring with us from life to life is completely used up. Our personality or Self is shed at death as is our body. However, the karmic traces or residue of our actions and intent is recorded in the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness) which, like a barge, is somehow dragged in the mind from rebirth to rebirth, and where in each rebirth, a new personality and Self is temporarily formed from our unfulfilled desires and latent tendencies.

That’s what I have learned from my dharma teachers. The thought of repeating the process of dying, rebirth, and intrauterine life is jaw-dropping to even consider, yet the only alternative is to break the cycles of Samsara through dharma realization and enlightenment and that too is not exactly a walk in the park, but is liberating.

If you want to study how emptiness relates to rebirth and the transfer of consciousness, you want to look into the Yogachara school of Buddhist philosophy. For me, my Yogachara teacher of choice is the Ven. Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche. IMO, Traleg’s Rinpoche’s very seminal book, titled “KARMA: What It Is, What It Isn’t, Why It matters” is the quintessential introduction to this topic. I don’t know how

many times I have read it, but I have marked up a number of copies.

MY PROBLEM WITH DHARMA TEXTS

August 28, 2019

[We got to KTD just by the "hair of my chinny chin chin."
There were many fierce rain storms that made it almost impossible to see, especially with the huge truck barreling by at 80 miles an hour. And the steep hills did not allow the water to run off, but rather to pile up, and so I found our car hydroplaning several times. Not so good. Anyway, we are here and safe. And I can share this:

Nothing never is quite as the textbooks say it is. When will I ever learn! Don't expect! And especially don't expect or anticipate any dharma realization, because it's not like whatever you imagine, and this is true by the definition of imagining or anticipation. Here is a little fun poem that says it clearly, IMO:

BEYOND MY EXPECTATIONS

Looking at the mind,
It's not what I'd expect.

Expectations can't define,
And you can't expect to find.

That's the nature of the mind.

I wrote the above poem years ago and I clearly saw what it was about, yet such things have to be ever fresh and new. There are no laurels for us to sit on. When they say that "Recognition" is recognizing the actual nature of the mind, they don't mean that the mind has some static nature to be seen or discovered. That's not it at all.

It's more that we recognize the nature of how the mind works and reach some familiarity and comfortableness with that, i.e. with how the mind works. So, we are not recognizing some solid or existing "nature of the mind." No, we recognize the true nature of how the mind actually is and works. Can you see the difference?

If we are looking for the nature of the mind as something to be found, some static state, we have already gone too far and missed the point. That's why we have the pointing-out

instructions and authentic masters to point this out to us, because our expectations (by default) have already reified what we are looking for as if it were a solid-state and thus we find ourselves beyond the actual reality of how the mind is and works. We reified and thus over-shot. LOL.

And so, when they say to look directly at the nature of a thought, that “nature” is not fixed like the content of that same thought is fixed. The dharma texts mean: look at the nature of how a thought (and thoughts in general) works, what it is, and how thoughts are like waves and water, a thought and the mind, etc. These masters are directing us to become familiar with thoughts and how they actually work and are not suggesting that a thought has a permanent nature that can be grasped. It is true that all thoughts have the SAME nature, yet (again) that “nature” is not a “thing” or a state, but rather simply the nature of how thoughts work in the mind, i.e. that they arise, then they cease, and so on. It is important that this is clear and that we do not freeze-frame a process as a state.

If we look at the content of a thought (what that thought is about; it’s “meaning”), we can drill down on something specific. The content of the thought is, for example, about food or about something we did or want to do, etc. However, when we are directed to look directly at the actual “nature” of any given thought (or thoughts), we are not talking about a definition like that the nature of a thought, the heart of that thought, so to speak, is something that this particular thought has, like the content. Rather, the nature of any thought (and the nature of ALL thoughts, their nature) is how they work and behave. That’s the nature of how thoughts work. And ALL thoughts have the exact same nature. They work similarly. That should be a clue. Again, I refer you to the traditional image that thoughts and the mind (like waves and water) are the same water. We must be careful not to reify into a thing what is not a thing, but is rather a process or function.

And, if you can make sense out of the above explanation, you should be able to see that what in the dharma we call “Recognition,” recognizing the actual nature of the mind, is that same thing, our becoming familiar with how the mind works so that we realize that the mind is not only workable, but workable by us. REALIZING that is crucial and that is

“Recognition” in a nutshell We should, in addition, then be able to see that “Recognition,” while itself a realization, is just the beginning of our working with the mind and not an end-state in itself.

This is how I see it. How about you?

WALKING ON THE MOUNTAIN

August 30, 2019

Drive, drive, drive to get here and then I arrive and there I am. Same old me, but taking it all in. I am glad to be here and off the road, but it takes me a while to acclimatize. Yesterday morning I hiked down the mountain just before the sun came up, about a mile, and came back up. This is a mountain, so going down is easy, but walking up is very slow. I have to monitor my heartbeats so as not to stress-out on the walk back up. It is slow going.

It is three o'clock in the morning right now and I am writing this to you folks to catch up with my blog and then will go down the mountain again in a couple hours. There are bears here and over the years I have encountered them; they walk around outside the monastery looking for food, so one has to look out for them. Yesterday, I took some photos in the main shrine room. I post one below with Margaret sitting and doing some meditation practice.

Visiting KTD Monastery's bookstore (Namse Bangdzo Bookstore; they have a lot of books, probably more than I do at our center, all the books I no longer read in much. Plus, they have a lot of books I don't have and have never seen.

I realize that most of these books are (at least for me) too conceptual. Many are more scholarly than I can digest. They just go in one ear and out the other, so to speak. Why is that?

Well, for one reason, many of the words are not that well known to westerners and some even for me. About all you can do is to look up these words in a special dictionary. Even then, all you will find is just more words and concepts. And that, for me, is a problem. I never get much headway going before I kind of space out.

I am not a scholar and have not enough time to become one so late in life. That's just not how I want to spend my time and there is a part of me that I am afraid does not really like intellectual concepts that have not enough juice to get my attention. I should be more understanding and kind with scholars, but my fear is that some don't know what they can

only talk about. At least I don't know what they are talking about. LOL.

So, what am I to do about this? Well, the simple solution is that I no longer spend days and weeks trying to read books that are too intellectual for me. Then again, I also find that a different translation and translator can make all the difference in the world. And that fact I find as a little unsettling.

Are there just a lot of bad translations out there? Or, do each of us find a translation that syncs with us? I believe it is the former and not the latter. There seem to be a lot of texts translated by translators that have not realized some of the texts they have translated. Maybe these are just for other scholars. I don't know. I need a translation that can grab me by the short-hairs, as they say.

I even go so far as to open a book and browse through it until I find some part that seems juicy enough for me to get enthused about. Then I work backward and forward from there until the vein of interest just runs out.

Some books I even read from the back to the front, if only because the first chapter or so is too scholarly or introductory to hold my attention. And I don't like to read what is to me a boring front of a book only to get to the back and find it the same or worse. LOL.

So, today I set up the video equipment and the first session will be this evening. Margaret and I run the camera and see that it's downloaded and documented.

THE KARMA WITH NO NAME

August 31, 2019

I draw your attention to the fact that most rope is not one long strand of anything, but rather many short strands threaded or braided together. And I use this as an analogy to talk about life, death, and our subsequent rebirth. In learning about eastern religions, we find that there are generally three kinds of approaches. They are often labeled as the Nihilists, the Eternalists, and the Buddhist view.

The Nihilists we are quite familiar with, if only from the old Schlitz beer commercials and their ilk, with slogans like “You only go around once in life, so go for the gusto, if you can.” You live and then you die and that’s “all she wrote.”

The view of the Eternalists can be found in many of the Indian philosophies, where the idea is of an Oversoul or Eternal Soul, that moves from body to body, but with the same consciousness. This is perhaps most eloquently stated in the Bhagavad Gita. Using the above analogy, we would say that with Eternalists, there is only one long strand making up the rope.

And then there is the Buddhist view, which states that there is no “one strand,” no Eternal Soul or Oversoul, and no eternal consciousness that flits from one life to the next in a contiguous consciousness. The Buddhists, as is their case, take a middle way to life after death. Unlike the Indian belief in reincarnation of the same eternal entity or permanent soul going from body to body, the Buddhist view says that there is no eternal soul and no reincarnation, but, rather, only a series of rebirths.

It gets complicated, but in general the view I follow states that at death, what you and I call our Self does not cohere or remain, but rather is abandoned and left to disincorporate (psychologically) along with our body. We might ask then what moves forward and what is the difference between rebirth and reincarnation?

Reincarnation is (as mentioned) that Indian idea that at death our personal consciousness (me, myself, and I) continues on

to a next life and that particular consciousness “reincarnates,” lock, stock, and barrel, more or less. And, also as mentioned, the Buddhist view disagrees and says that everything personal about our (Self, Ego, etc.) is checked at the door on the way out. What then, we may again ask, goes forward to a next life?

And the Buddhists (at least the Yogacara School of Buddhism) respond that while our consciousness as (for example: Michael Erlewine) does not transmigrate to a new life, the desires, and graspingness of Michael Erlewine, does. However, even this group of desires, the tendency to fixate and get attached, etc. does not transfer as a unit, but rather (somehow) as a collection of tendencies or traits in some kind of “random” bundle or arrangement.

And so, the Buddhists take a middle way, that each segment or thread in a braided rope is short, a bit of karmic trace, that arises and then is gone, but the collection of the combined karmic threads is woven together to create a rope, an animation of our desires, actions, etc. – karma.

And so, we are animated not by one continuous strand in the rope of consciousness from life to life, not an Eternal Soul (or whatever), but by this combination of components threaded together to create a continuity of continuous animated life.

And so, our collection of karma, consisting of what are called Vasanas (karmic traces, desires, etc.) extends from life to life, from the death in one life to rebirth in the next, How is this possible, when everything else is short-lived and cannot extend that long, such as our Self and personality, which is dropped at death?

No reason is given in the teachings I have read, other than that in the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), the period of extension is longer than any single contiguous consciousness. I joke with myself that in the Alaya Consciousness, it is like we put our karmic traces in the refrigerator, giving them longer life. LOL. Or, perhaps the collective life of our Vasanas, like a colony of bees, cohere, even with some attrition as a mass long enough to take hold of an egg and sperm and continue in a rebirth. Whatever the case or explanation, apparently the Alayavijnana, as a

collection, endures and is able to grasp and create a new birth and life, thus living again.

We are not the same person as in the last life, but rather a new person created from the same Storehouse Consciousness from before, as modified by the genes, conditions, circumstances, parent, and situation of our rebirth.

While rebirth is differentiated from the concept of a Permanent Soul, nevertheless, if this is the case, and we are alive and living, as we obviously are, even if only through a rebirth of our persistent karmic traces and qualities, then that is something significant in itself. We have never known anything else. Yes, not an eternal soul, yet a kind of continuing as a collection of the karmic properties that make us up

We are the reanimation of our own karma, a braided rope, so to speak, of everything that still persists in making us, "Us." And this is said to continue through time and lives until ALL the karmic traces are exhausted, at which time we are said to be enlightened of our karma.

So, we are "composite" beings. Our collective karma, the desires, etc. are still unified enough that together they create and activate a womb of one sort or another, and the collected bundle (like the skandhas) is enough to reanimate a particular kind of body of vehicle exclusively.

And so, while there may be no eternal soul, our collection of vasanas, karmic traces, etc., somehow hang together or cohere enough that we are one entity at a time

I can only imagine, which is a dangerous thing to do, that our karma may have many names over time (lives), as it is pushed forward or impelled by its own force.

It may take one form or another, "The Karma with No Name," yet that nameless (or renamed) mass and bundle of karma takes many names and lives.. and/or types of bodies.

And so, there are many different lives, one after another, just not the same person or "soul" progressing from life to life. The karma with no name or person persists through time. The Buddhists explain that if we had an eternal soul, we could never change or improve, but would be doomed to always be

the same. It is because we do not have a permanent soul that we can progress and change, and become enlightened.

And so, that is the general idea of rebirth. Your thoughts?

THE SONG OF TRANSMISSION

September 1, 2019

Yesterday was an all-day Reading-Transmission, and a very rare one at that. The Tibetans feel that when you get dharma instruction from a sacred text that, aside from the instruction, you need to have the entire traditional sacred text read allowed for you to hear, over your body, so to speak. There is something about the sound of the actual Tibetan sinking into your consciousness that leaves a deep impression.

For many years, our teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, has taught on a large and classic dharma text called the “Mountain Dharma” by the great master Karma Chagme. Many of us have received that teaching, as mentioned, over a number of years. However, we have never received the reading- transmission for that text from which the teaching came.

Visiting KTD Monastery is a very special Vajra Master, Lama Tobden, who is not only the Umdze at Thrangu Monastery in Tibet, but also the Dorje Lopon, as mentioned, the Vajra Master from Thrangu Monastery. Lama Tobden is here to give the reading-transmission of the entire works of Karma Chagme, some 60 volumes over many weeks. However, yesterday he gave the reading-transmission for the, as mentioned, Mountain Dharma teachings of Karma Chagme, which started at 8:30 in the morning and went on until 5:45 PM, with not many breaks. So, we have about 7-8 hours of this special reading transmission. You might ask what this was like, so here are my impressions, but you can be sure that different folks have different impressions. Here is mine.

Reading transmission are read very, very fast, at high speeds, so although I am used to listening to Tibetan for some 45 years, the sound of Tibetan read at high speeds for this extended length of time was new to me.

The sound of crushed consonants and slurred or few vowels was kind of startling; this constant stream of sound punctuated by little else kind of mesmerizes the mind. It goes on for 3-4 hours at a time, uninterrupted.

However, rising from with the background of the consonants is a kind of a “song of the vowels” that emerges as the dorje lupon hunts for the next part of the text that is not redundant. It kind of comes out with an “uhh uhh” sound that seems to almost have a melody.

These vowels come out in a slow burst, only a second or seconds long, and link together in the mind to make a song that rises above or through the rain of consonants. This rising song, appearing bit by bit, where the bits are separated from each other, but connect in your mind is very beautiful. If you could have it all together without the consonants it would be a serious, but not sad, song of (IMO) sublime beauty, heartbreaking for its beauty.

I think this kind of song emerges from the vajra masters continuing to hold a tone while hunting for the next piece of text in the reading that is not redundant.

And here is what came to my mind while I was kind of mesmerized by the beauty of melody. It is probably too revealing, but who cares. It was about forgiveness.

FORGIVENESS

“I forgive this Samsaric-life I am living for being so unforgiving.”

“I forgive”

“Forgiveness.

As a musician at heart, it’s all about music for me, and this seeming-endless chant-like reciting is, to me, like music, a song all by itself that I hear the music in there, a music borne along by the reciting, a kind of subtext that rises about the crush of consonants and compressed vowels.

As mentioned, through all that recitation, a rising song, a slow rise, just a few bars at a time that connect in time and lift me up; they are uplifting. They lift me up and leave me there and then pick up further the next few bars and, higher and higher it goes (and I get).

That’s how I experience it, but one could also experience it like some sort of Tibetan auctioneer who never ends. LOL.

SAMSARA IS OUR ROSE-COLORED GLASSES

September 2, 2019

I'm still at KTD Monastery and in the thick of it. Today, there were three hours of teachings and also three hours or so of reading transmissions by the Dorje Lopon from Thrangu Monastery in Tibet. Margaret and I continue to record the teachings by video and back them up. Otherwise, there are the meals and conversations with my fellow dharma practitioners. I have had to watch my blood pressure while I am here, because there seems to be too much input and not enough down-time. I am working on it. I also continue to walk down the back side of the mountain at 6 AM as the sun comes up, something like a 2-mile hike.

Otherwise, internally I continue to process the aftermath of the stroke I had a few months ago, and what it actually means to me in terms of modifying my life and dharma practice.

The great dharma teachings say that we are subject to and (in fact) imprisoned by our habitual fixations, attachments, and endless entertainments. I got that years ago, or so I thought.

You know, reification, reifying, gilding-the-lily, trying to reify myself and make the parts of reality I most like more real than it is or ever was. We magnify the importance and continue to reify what we like and try to push and get away from what we don't like. I get that too.

In fact, as a dharma student, I make a point of un-gilding the likely, trying to walk-back or discourage the reifying until my life is more "plain." I get that too!

The problem (and what I didn't get), is that everything I have described above turns out to be, although worthwhile, just the tip of the iceberg of essentially nothing at all.

Then, I had a major stroke a few months ago and that changed everything, my view, etc., and from the inside out. BAM!

And, what I learned from the stroke, in a nutshell, is that everything I originally thought and imagined was not even

very good lip service. In reality, I had barely scratched the surface.

And that Reality was WAY deeper than the surface I was skating on. Samsara is not just surface deep; it runs through the whole of life as we know it, until the day that it is completely realized.

As it turns out, everything that we know and love is Samsara, not just (as mentioned) on the surface, but clean through and through. In a word, we are stuck in Samsara, pretty much completely, and to the exclusion of even an idea of escape or difference.

If we take away our fixation on Samsara, our attachments, and our total immersion in our endless entertainment, there is little to nothing left. NOTHING is left, perhaps a play on words.

After the stroke, being suddenly left with nothing is like realizing that nothing is the reality is, and this was at least for me, devastating. Samsara, this cyclic cycling, is our skin, our everything, and it fits us like a skin and is skintight – not even a crack, for the most part. It is how we experience the world. Samsara is the filter between the world and ourselves. We love it.

What we know, we know through Samsara. And take that away, and we are exposed to the actual reality and it is not like heaven or going to heaven as we might like to imagine.

Instead, it is like looking directly at the Sun head-on with no sun shades or filter. That is excruciating, which is what I found out.

Again: It is like, without the filter of Samsara, we can't see because of the brilliant glare of the light of reality. Read that last sentence again, please. Without Samsara's filter, which we imagine we don't like, we cannot stand the brilliance of the glare of the actual nature of the mind itself.

My point is that we are not ready, not prepared for the stark reality of reality. When I faced it through the stroke, all I could do is turn away and hide my face. And by hide, I mean hide myself in busyness and entertainment every second of the live-long day. Anything but be real.

NO OTHER WELL

September 3, 2019

KTD Monastery Update:

Time is lifting its wings and starting to fly as it always seems to do around here, once we get into the 10-Day sessions. We are already halfway done and I am still trying to catch up with being here. Pujas start at 6 AM with Green Tara and then, from there, its all day doing this or that until 8 PM. I do the best I can, but I have to rest a certain amount or my health begins to slide.

We are still doing three hours or so of reading-transmissions each day and then the regular teachings, punctuated by breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I've had to catch naps as I can.

We've had a bear again here at the monastery, coming to dig in the garbage bins for food. This one is probably a yearling, but he very deliberately dug out a large plastic container that still had some food in it, and with the large container clutched in his lips (and hanging down in front of him), he slowly walked up the hill and into the woods.

This has been going on for years. I can remember one time, years ago, when right outside my window was a large steel trash bin, but locked with chain and padlock. A fully grown bear would come in the middle of the night, get on the trash bin, and slam the door up and down trying to break the chain. It was a powerful force. And so, there are bears here in the mountains. They sound like fun, but one has to be very careful nevertheless.

Here is a photo taken by my friend Amy Schwartz, while I was busy working the camera for the teachings. This shows a very happy young boy sandwiched in between KTD's Khenpo Karma Tenkyong on the right (chanting) and His Holiness the 17th Karmapa's Attendant for many years (I don't know how to spell his name). I first met this attendant in 1997 at the Karmapa's ancestral monastery (Tsurphu) in Tibet at some 15,000 feet. He is staying here at KTD Monastery for a while.

As for me: no earth-shaking revelations; I am getting the idea that it is better for me to practice meditation and mindfulness

while I am here rather than just meet new people or catch up with old friends. I can do both at once, but mindfulness in either case takes precedence if I want to have any equilibrium.

If I find myself looking for peace or rest in the moment, I can search, but I will only find it in allowing my mind to rest in the awareness of this moment.

Once we drink from that well, is there any other?

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

September 4, 2019

Life here at the yearly Ten-Day Teachings continues to be jam-packed, with not enough time to do this blog properly. Yet, I am trying to keep in touch with my Facebook friends, at least those who are interested.

The best I can do here is report on a little exchange that I had between myself and the Khenpo who was taking questions. Now, this khenpo is not my teacher (who is not feeling well), but another very fine teacher who is filling in for him. And what follows here will be, if I have the chance, what I will present to Khenpo Ugyen who is conducting the current teaching and the questions and answer sessions that follow the teaching.

I was asking Khenpo-la about what is called the Storehouse Consciousness, in which our karmic traces (vasanas) are said to be stored between one life and rebirth. And I will give you enough idea (I hope) to follow my response, which is below.

Generally, the Vajrayana approach I follow, has three different types, the Eternalists, the Nihilists, and the middle-way, which I hopefully I am following.

The Eternalists

The Eternalists believe in an Oversoul, Watcher, or Permanent soul, as many religions do, the idea that we go from one life to the next as the reincarnation of our consciousness, the same consciousness as we have today.

It reminds me of Bhagavad Gita “The Song Celestial” as translated by Sir. Edwin Arnold, and the part that says:

“Nay, but as when one layeth His worn-out robes away, And taking new ones, sayeth, “These will I wear to-day!”
So putteth by the spirit Lightly its garb of flesh, And passeth to inherit A residence afresh.”

That’s a poetic way of stating the Eternalist position.

The Nihilists

At the other end of the fulcrum are the Nihilists, who believe that we live, die, and are done, much as the old Schlitz beer commercial, whose slogan was “You only go around once, so you’ve got to grab all the gusto you can.” That would be a Nihilist poem.

And the Buddhist view, as I understand, is a middle-way between the Nihilists on one hand and the eternalists on the other

What I pointed out yesterday during the Q&A was that at death, our personality, Self, plus all of our fixations, attachments, etc. are left behind. They do NOT persist beyond this life and do not somehow appear in the next life (whether you want to call it reincarnation or rebirth).

And although I thought Khenpo Ogyen’s eight examples of the fact that the consciousness between one life and a rebirth is not the same (which would be Eternalism), were very elegant, I never thought that anyway. That’s why I asked the question, to be clear about the vasanas and how the Storehouse Consciousness works.

What I did say was that while the persistence of our personal Self, etc. was not strong enough to influence any rebirth, as Khenpo-la said, “nothing moved” as far as consciousness between one life and the next rebirth.

What I also said was that the texts I have read (such as Traleg Rinpoche’s book on Karma) is that for some reason, our karmic traces or vasanas (as stored or recorded in the Storehouse Consciousness), the eighth consciousness according to the Yogacharans, do persist longer than our personal Self, etc. and from that Storehouse influences us on rebirth.

If this were not true, what would be the point of Karma be? If I create karma that has an effect, in the next rebirth or several rebirths down the line, why would I worry about (or be connected to) karma that I was not somehow linked to? Some other consciousness and person would reap the effects of karma I created in this life? There would be no effects for me for any karma I created other than what would ripen in this life I am now living.

What I also yesterday called the “top-down” effect of karma, which would be Eternalism, as in a continuing (same) consciousness in rebirth, was off the table, the “bottom up” approach, which would be that karma stored in the Storehouse Consciousness in this life somehow does effect or is accessed at our rebirth, because as mentioned, otherwise it would not have any link to this life in our rebirth.

How could it be called our “rebirth” if we were not somehow linked to it? I am NOT saying I understand how this all works, which is why I am asking the question. And, I already understood, as mentioned yesterday, that a continuing consciousness (Eternalism) was not the case. However, if you said it, I missed the explanation, as mentioned here, as to how our particular Karma, which we are supposed to be responsible for, asserts itself in rebirth if there is no connection. Or, are you saying that we create karma that some other totally different person is subject to. In which case, how is it our karma and how will we ever be responsible? Or are we just creating karma for which we are not responsible for, like some karmic Johnny Appleseed sows apple seeds?

And I understand that such karma does not carry the stamp of the consciousness of Michael Erlewine, yet it does seem to carry the stamp of the karmic traces (vasanas) of this life (and probably previous lives) of Michael Erlewine. And how will I get enlightened if I can’t change through succeeding lives? Who is it that gets enlightened?

I would like that clarified please.

99% SAMSARA AND REIFIED

September 5, 2019

As of late, thanks to my stroke some months ago, the whole idea of reification has gone through an overhaul. All I can say is that there is so much that I don't know. And one of these is the state of reification for me and, I would estimate, for all of us.

I have posted here in blogs about reification for years, and I assumed I understood what the term meant, especially when it came to its use in dharma discussions. Reification, in summary, is about making something more real than it is, kind of piling on our attachment to a concept or thing, because we like it or want it to be more real for us than it, in fact, is. The old phrase "gilding the lily" comes to mind. Or dictionaries might tell you that treating a whole as a thing rather than the sum of its parts and interdependent is an example of reification.

Perhaps the most famous example of reification would be Eternalism, the belief in an eternal soul or "Oversoul" as opposed to Nihilism, the idea that life is meaninglessly random and ends when we die. And the Buddhist view is a middle way between the extremes of Eternalism and Nihilism.

This cyclic world of cycles that we inhabit or are stuck in is what the Buddhists call "Samsara." It is contrasted with (and is considered the opposite) to "Nirvana," Enlightenment. It is a little more complex than that as Samsara and Enlightenment are said to be connate, meaning they are two sides of the same coin, i.e. indissolubly linked.

In fact, although they are often presented as opposites Nirvana is nothing other than realized Samsara. As I was brought up Christian, for years I thought that Samsara was this gnarly world I found myself in and Nirvana (like heaven) would be where I went when I managed to escape or get away from Samsara.

However, a study of the dharma found me gradually amazed to find that Samsara was unrealized Nirvana, and most shocking of all that there was no pie-in-the-sky or heaven to

get to, but instead that Nirvana was the same Samsara I'm stuck in realized. In other words, this is It! There is no other place to graduate or escape to. My first western dharma used to say "This is hell, Michael; we have to make our heaven in a corner of it." Back, then I didn't get it.

Now I do. I am going nowhere lest I realize Samsara as Nirvana right here on the spot. This is all background for what I will now share with you.

What I realized through my stroke was that Samsara was not like a veneer beneath which was Nirvana gold if I just drilled down. What was obvious to me through my experience is that Samsara was not just on the surface, but rather itself was 100% solid through and through, from top to bottom and inside out.

And much harder for me to understand is that "I" was not just the "eye" of the pyramid, the tip of the top, of samsara, but rather that I was completely encased and devoted to Samsara, at least to an astonishing degree. That I never thought before.

I, and I imagine "we," are almost entirely creatures of Samsara, although we very much like to believe otherwise. Why I say this is because at the time of my stroke and for many weeks afterward everything I knew as my Self, my attachments, fixations, and any and all manner entertainment was stripped from my consciousness leaving me in a veritable desert of non-entertainment, stripped of reification.

And, my dear FB friends, my life was like an empty theater stage, when the production is over – bare floors, no backdrops, music or decoration, with perhaps just one very bright light perhaps up in the catwalks.

Every kind of means to entertain myself was gone, leaving me on a desert plain with a blinding midday sun up above. Through this experience I realized that Samsara was almost the complete filter through which I saw and experienced this world. As mentioned earlier, it was not a layer of veneer, but part and parcel of everything I am.

Not only that, but Samsara was the rose-colored (or not so rosy) glasses through which I lived my life and peered. There

was little else. And without my habits, attachments, fixations, and my world of entertaining myself I was alone and desolate.

To put it mildly, I had NO idea whatsoever as to the breadth and depth of Samsara and its hold on me. NONE!

I share this for those who can make any sense out of it that is useful or at least take it in. I have shared this stroke experience and its vision with a number of folks and I see them hurriedly rationalizing my experience as part of the medical condition of a stroke, but I can't stop them from closing the door. As my first dharma teacher used to say to me. We can close the door, but the winds of change and life will come and blow it open and then we will be unable to close it.

I had no idea how dedicated I was to Samsara and its earmarks.

I'm just saying.

TRANSMISSION AS READ

September 10, 2019

I'm back! About a fifteen-hour trip (860 miles return trip), not through Canada (as usual), but through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and into Michigan. It was a straight drive, with Margaret and I switching off, yet her doing the lion's share. No stops, except for gas and bathroom.

It is always amazing to me that we can drive this little car from there to here, in one piece. It's enough to boggle the mind, IMO. Yet, here I am, with piles of laundry to do, all kinds of video and still photos to deal with. And, generally, back into chaos we came, since there was floor refinishing being done and rooms to paint that did not get as far as we expected.

Nevertheless, here we are, back in familiar haunts, with the mess here to work through! And what was gained by all this moving our bodies across the face of the Earth? Too early to say, but something useful, for sure, and a lot of activity in the meantime. Well, seeing Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was number one, with the amazing reading-transmission by the Dorje Lopön a close second.

For me, this reading transmission by the Dorje Lopön (Vajra Master) from Thrangu Monastery in Tibet was an amazing experience, although a little bit grueling. Sitting for sometimes seven hours a day on a cushion, concentrating on the voice of the Dorje Lopön intoning Tibetan at high speed, was mesmerizing to say the least.

The hours of sound drilled down into my consciousness, deep down, eyes open a lot, but also closed, at which time patterns of maroon and gold were slowly dancing on my eyelids, while the time stretched on and on. Hours would go gradually by and then finish. It would be lunch time or whatever and me struggling with the slipstream of it all.

It has been said that just hearing these sacred words recited into our mind is an initiation itself. I believe it. And this went on pretty much for 10 days, as well as our normal teaching and question & answer sessions. At the end of a day, I pretty much crawled into bed and was swept away to sleep, often as

early as 7:30 PM, only to be up at 1:30 AM writing a blog such as this.

My life, inside, has ever so slightly shifted, but it is too early for me to get a handle on it and share that with folks here. I'm working on it.

A HARBINGER: THE IPHONE 11 PRO MAX

September 12, 2019

Most of my FB friends know I like photography. And so, when something new comes along, such as the new Apple iPhone 11 Pro, I can't help but notice.

I feel that the new iPhone 11 Pro/Pro Max marks a pivot point, especially with the forthcoming "Deep Fusion" mode which combines a series of shots (like focus-stacking) to make a highly detailed shot. The iPhone 11 can also produce the Adobe DNGs, which amount to a raw digital negative.

The new iPhone 11 Pro now has three cameras built-in:

An ultra-wide 13mm f/2.4 5-element lens with 120-degrees field of view and a 12MP sensor.

A 26mm f/1.8 wide, 6-elements, 12 MP sensor with optical stabilization camera.

A 52mm telephoto f/2.0, 6-element lens, with optical stabilization, 2x optical zoom 12MP sensor.

It also works with some fascinating pieces of software for video called "Filmic" and "Moment", which allow one to use some of the multiple cameras in the iPhone 11 creatively. In addition, the iPhone 11 Pro/Pro Max has 512 GB and up to 5 hours more battery time than before.

My best guess is that this iPhone event is a toehold on the future and a flag or sign that perhaps the iPhone 11 Pro can finally handle low to medium photographic tasks, if not right now, then soon.

When you consider, as mentioned, that we can get digital negatives (DNGs) from this camera, Night Mode, and a small host of other features, we have, IMO, crossed a point of no-return. If this is not the "next page," then at least the iPhone 11 sends a signal that a sea-change indeed is here or coming soon.

The thought of carrying an iPhone, a gimbal, and a few other accessories instead of all the gear I now carry is worth thinking about. No, perhaps not for landscapes and the kind

of close-up I like, but to be able to carry around a camera in my shirt pocket to address all of the times I wish I had a camera with me is tempting. I am getting one and selling a bunch of great lenses that I never use.

In other words, I suggest we are transitioning as to what we use photography for. I can't or don't want to haul a lot of equipment around. I just came back from a 1600-mile trip, carrying a Nikon Z7 mirrorless camera and bunch of lenses and a Sony FS-5 camera system for video, plus two separate tripods, heads, cables, and on and on. That's a job and all that equipment fills up the back of our car.

I would also like to have an upscale smart phone like the iPhone 11 Pro with perhaps a gimbal, a monopod, and a tiny tripod when I want something simpler, or just take an iPhone out when I walk or whatever. I am liking the idea of making small videos, as well.

I've been photographing since 1956 and have had just about every Nikon digital camera since the Nikon CoolPix and the Nikon D1x DRSL and on up to the Nikon Z7. I have scores of lenses and have been very serious about close-up macro and focus stacking.

So, I don't say this glibly, that for me this is a transitional moment, getting the iPhone 11 Pro for some fairly serious work. I still have all my cameras, technical cameras, bellows, and lenses, although I will sell some lenses. I will continue to use all the digital cameras in my studio and especially in winter here in Michigan.

However, I am going to see what it feels like to have a reasonably capable camera I can place in my pocket. And I have ordered all the accessories already: gimbal, apps, tripod heads, and so on.

This new iPhone 11 Pro is good enough for me to give it a serious try. And, I want to try my hand at making short videos, as well.

IMO, we are looking in the wrong places for the future of photography if we imagine that the future will be trying to create feature-length films on the iPhone. Instead, I feel we will be seeing many more personal creations of short videos, not caring about the big screen, but sharing precious

moments with each other just for the beauty of it. That is what I see the advances in video via smart phones are a harbinger of. The future, in my experience, never seems to come about just linearly, but often differently from what we imagined. I feel this is happening with the advent of the Apple 11 Pro smart phone, with its three cameras.

MERIT & AWARENESS

September 13, 2019

When I ask Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (my dharma teacher of almost 40 years) what is the main obstacle for most people in dharma practice, the answer is always “lack of merit.” Not enough merit has been accumulated. This is why we practice dharma, to accumulate enough merit. Enough merit for what? And also, what is merit anyway in dharma terms?

A quick look through a half dozen dharma teachings shows me that often ‘merit’ is said in the same breath as the term “awareness.” In other words, the phrase “Merit & Awareness” occurs again and again in the Buddhist literature. Sometimes these two terms are also translated as “Skillful Means & Wisdom.” Thus ‘merit’ is synonymous with ‘skillful means’ and ‘awareness’ is synonymous with ‘wisdom.’ More interesting is the fact that these two terms not only occur together but they are reciprocal and actually cause one another to appear in the world. How does this work?

“Merit” refers to skillful or meritorious actions that we make as opposed to sloppy or unskillful actions. Doing something properly or skillfully (or kindly, gently) has a different type of effect (dharmically or karmically speaking) than unskillful actions. We all know this. In other words, skillful actions are meritorious and sloppy actions somehow lack the same merit. That is why skilled labor and skills in general are so valued in our society. Great skill in anything is inherently meritorious, so much more so when it comes to dharma actions like saying a mantra or working on your sitting meditation practice. And now for the kicker.

Not only are skillful dharma actions (or any skillful actions) meritorious, but their precise performance itself is clarifying and causes awareness or clarity to arise in us. Great skill in action, whether watching a ballet or a football receiver, somehow enhances that activity. It is obvious. I like to tell myself that awareness is the aura of our actions, either good or bad. We instantly are more aware of skill when we see or feel it compared to a poor execution. This is particularly true in the martial arts or, for that matter, any of the arts, sciences,

etc. – just about everything. The more skillful our actions, the more clarity of awareness takes place or surrounds it. Somehow, skillful actions create space or an aura around themselves -- clarity and awareness. And here is what I find marvelous:

Increased awareness of what we are doing makes it easier for us to be more skillful yet, and thus more skillful actions bring forth even more awareness, and so it goes - recursively. This for me was an incredible concept to learn of, the dharma engine that each practitioner is working to jump start. And like spontaneous combustion or fusion, once this chain reaction is started, it feeds on and propels itself onward. It becomes automatic. The problem for beginning dharma practitioners is getting it started in the first place. We have to be skillful.

I found it helpful to understand this recursive cycle, and here is how: For years, although I was faithful in my dharma practice, I was too often just putting in the time, kind of waiting my allotted meditation-period out until it was over so I could go on with the rest of my day (which I was often anxiously anticipating). In truth, I found meditation boring. In other words, there was little (or very little) skillful or meritorious actions taking place on my part and correspondingly little awareness arose as a result. I was waiting for the awareness but, like striking flint to steel to make a fire, yet I was not striking the rocks properly or skillfully, and of course there was little to no fire. Only, at the time I did not know why I was getting no fire. Too often, I was just putting in my time and watching the clock.

Had I understood the above concept, I would have been far, far better off to have had short meditation periods (perhaps more often) in which I skillfully participated in rather than those longer ones in which I basically tuned out and noodled through them. To turn the wheel of the dharma, “We” actually have to turn the wheel ourselves. Otherwise the wheel does not turn. Our dharma practice will sit there forever with no real change or, as in my case, a change for the worse as I became more jaded and discouraged at the lack of any results. Let me repeat the concept one more time to make sure it is clear.

“Merit & awareness” are a dynamic duo that are the one of the keys to proper dharma practice and getting results or greater ‘awareness’. If we do our dharma practice skillfully, say each mantra properly, clearly, cleanly, and with the proper intent, or when sitting in meditation we gently (but firmly) bring our mind back to the breath (or whatever object) every time we discover we have again been distracted, then increased awareness will indeed arise over time. We become clearer. And with increased awareness comes the opportunity to see to do still more-skillful actions and thus create even greater awareness, and ad infinitum. It is self-perpetuating, a positive Catch-22.

And this effect is not restricted only to the time we spend practicing on the meditation cushion. Our post-meditation practice, the rest of our day, is an ideal practice ground as well for “merit & awareness” training. As the Zen practitioners point out so well, we can be skillfully mindful of our every action, like raising a cup of tea to our lips or greeting a fellow being, human or otherwise. There is no end to the opportunities for skillful means in any day and there is no end to the awareness that can arise in return or response. This kind of practice we can do all day long and if done skillfully, the needed merit will accumulate for greater realization and eventual enlightenment.

According to my dharma teachers, to become aware or enlightened we have to accumulate merit, lots of it. What I am pointing out here is that rote dharma practice (like any other rote practice) will not take us far. The Buddha, a human being like ourselves, pointed out how to become more aware and wake up, but he also made it very clear that we each have to walk the path ourselves. No one, not even the Buddha, can enlighten us. We must enlighten ourselves. That’s what the Buddha did.

Practicing meritorious or skillful actions will cause authentic awareness to arise, but we have to be there personally in the moment for this to take place. We have to actually do it, moment by moment.

[The images for Merit & Awareness in dharma frequently are the Dorje (Vajra) for Skillful-Means (Merit) and the Bell for Awareness or Wisdom.]

For those of you who would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

ASPIRATION AND DEDICATION

September 14, 2019

I am ashamed to say that it took me many years to get the following concepts through my thick skull. Not sure what I was thinking or even if I was thinking, but I kind of let it go in one ear and out the other.

Somehow, it seemed like too great an effort or somehow not necessary for me to actually just do it as suggested. I guess I don't like being told what to do. That was a very big mistake on my part. This has to do with how we begin and end our dharma practice for the day or for each session or (any practice), whether sitting on the cushion or out just walking around.

In previous blogs I have pointed out that the effects of merit accumulation are key to reducing the obstacles that prevent us from recognizing the true nature of the mind. We perform acts all day long, most of them probably unskillful, but certainly some skillful enough to generate merit of one kind or another. What becomes of this merit? Does it just pile up in some corner of our mind, or what? Where does merit go?

I still have a lot of questions myself in this area, so I am no expert, but the Buddhist teachers I have listened to suggest that merit, unless somehow contained, is just free to go. We benefit from the merit whenever it is generated, but for one-time, and then it evaporates or otherwise trickles away, like air out of a balloon. It has done its thing, what good it can.

Obviously, the question then becomes how do we accumulate merit beyond its initial temporary effect? How can we pool or keep it? The Buddhists have a method to preserve merit, benefit once from it, yet then still have it keep on benefiting us. How is this possible?

Karma and merit are two different things, but they overlap. No matter how good our karma can get, it only affects our rebirth in Samsara. And yes, karma also can generate merit, but it is said that while karmic merit makes for more pleasant conditions for us on the Samsaric (day-to-day) level, eventually it is used up and we regress to a previous state,

and perhaps to an even lower rebirth. So, the merit from good karma is temporary. What about the other use of merit as present in the dharma pair commonly labelled "Merit & Awareness?"

In the gathering or accumulation of merit as in the pair, "Merit & Wisdom (or awareness)," merit can be put to use in creating awareness, which helps in thinning out and eventually removing whatever is obscuring our ability to realize our own Buddha Nature -- the true nature of the mind. The recursive result of the reciprocation of merit and awareness (one to another) results in the actual lessening of our obscurations. And, if we can keep from recording more karma by purifying our actions, we can hold onto that result, be it realization or any improvement in our dharmic condition.

I have found that I had to stop imagining "merit" as something that accumulates somewhere (like a merit-bank), even though the translation of the Tibetan often is the "accumulation of merit." Instead, it is more accurate to think of merit as effects that are cumulative, and whose result is a thinning out of our obscurations by way of increasing awareness, rather than a pile of pixie-dust stored up in a corner somewhere. In other words, merit accumulation (cumulative merit) is a process that removes our obscurations by increasing our awareness so that when all is said and done, we have become clearer. That clarity (awareness) is the result of cumulative merit -- accumulating merit. It can stay with us if it is reinvested.

Now, the way that Buddhists preserve the merit and awareness they have accumulated is by dedicating it. And here again, the terms can be misleading, so hold on to your hats, for here come another pair of essential dharma terms: Aspirations and the Dedication of Merit.

Rinpoches that I have studied under make a big deal of making aspirations both before you sit down to practice dharma and then dedicating the merit accrued after you have practiced. Some go so far as to say that this is equal to or more important than the practice itself, provided there is some merit to what we do. I can't speak to that myself, but the idea is simple enough.

Before we sit down to meditate and do our practice, we declare our intent through an aspiration. For example, we aspire that our practice (and our intention) is to gain realization in order to benefit all sentient beings – sentiment like that. It is that simple.

And, in similar fashion, before we get up from the cushion (or whatever practice we do), we dedicate any merit we have earned (however small) to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that we may become enlightened so that we may benefit all sentient beings and bring each to enlightenment. In a word, this is what comprises aspiration and dedication. Even if what we are doing off-the-cushion in “post meditation” is not totally dharmic, what is good in what we do, what has some merit, can also be dedicated. It’s all good or may have some good in it. Even if mundane, that “good” can be dedicated.

The Buddhist texts state that any merit we accumulate (and fail to dedicate) only blesses us once and like a single drop of water falling on the ground, it evaporates, while merit that is dedicated by ourselves to others is like adding that drop of water to the ocean. It lasts as long as the ocean lasts. I am still thinking on that one, but that's what they say.

What I can say is that these four things, Merit & Awareness plus Aspirations & Dedication have one thing perfectly in common, that they exist to somehow lessen our obscurations. It is almost as if these practices (the dedication for others) are a form of misdirection, just like magicians use. I don't mean it quite like it sounds, so bear with me.

While we are focused on aspiring to help others and dedicating any merit to others, actually the purity of our intentions is streamlining our own view (and mindstream), gradually eliminating our particular obscurations. The problem with aspirations and dedications is that they can be (using the Buddhist term) "poisonous," meaning they can be tainted by our own selfish attachments and fixations. By offering our aspirations and dedications to others, we are one-step removed from our own selfish interests and that much more aerodynamically-pure or "dharmic." We can aspire to become enlightened ourselves so that we can better benefit others.

As for myself, I always have that phrase from the song “When the Saints Go Marching In” going through my head “I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.” I don’t have to be “number one” or anything special, but I would like to be included in those who are on the road to enlightenment, i.e. put my own selfishness to work.

So, in summary, and this is the extent of my understanding, the emphasis on aspiring and an intent to help and dedicating merit to others perhaps does benefit “others” in this world in some way. I can’t say. But I do know that removing self-reference (our own selfish-ness) from the equation gives us a better chance (makes it easier) to be pure in our own dedication gestures. And that kind of purity is what gradually removes the layers of obscuration we have accumulated.

I tell myself that dharma practice makes us more aerodynamically sound and able to rise above (transform) the fierce winds of change that Samsaric life subjects us to. And here is another analogy I use with myself, if you will permit it.

Dedicating merit to others is not unlike spinning a coin on a table top. We have to spin the coin and get our fingers out of the way or the fingers affect the spin. Here the fingers getting in the way represents the self-attachments clouding our merit.

Apparently when it comes to including ourselves in the offering, it is too easy for our habitual attachments to me, myself, and I to occlude or obscure the purity we need to attain in the way of merit, so we are encouraged instead to include others along with ourselves, and before ourselves.

It seems axiomatic in dharma practice that we have to attain realization ourselves BEFORE we can be of much use to others. That is why in the tradition I train in, we are not encouraged to teach others before we have realized something ourselves. Makes sense to me.

So, to wrap this up for now, until there are some questions, be sure to clarify your aspirations before practicing dharma and dedicate the merit of your practice after you have practiced. And make up your own dedication, using your own words. I find that is best; a dedication might sound something like this:

“I dedicate ANY merit that I have accumulated plus any merit that other sentient beings have accumulated in the past, present, and future (the three times), in the ten directions, and the innumerable worlds to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that they may bring all beings to full enlightenment.” We can recite something similar as an aspiration before going into our dharma practice.

It is said that we offer any merit to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas rather than just offer it ourselves because the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas know best how to make use of the merit we are dedicating.

[Here is a drawing by my brother Tom Erlewine of the traditional Tibetan white-scarf that westerners have adopted as something they offer to lamas and rinpoches. My dear friend and translator Ngodup Burkhar pointed out to me that presenting an empty scarf was not the tradition in Tibet. The scarf was like the empty envelope, which should have something in it, like an offering of some kind. He used to laugh that here are all these westerners offering their teachers empty envelopes. There should be some offering in the middle of that white scarf. LOL.]

BODHICITTA: ENLIGHTENED HEART

September 15, 2019

Buddhism brings with it some concepts new to most of us here in the west. We get it, that Buddha was a human (like we are) who enlightened himself, and his method (how he did it) is called the dharma. And Bodhisattvas are those on their way to becoming Buddhas. But what about that other (and more mysterious) term Bodhicitta, pronounced "bōdhi-cheatah." What is that?

Bodhicitta is one of the more subtle of the Buddhist concepts, often difficult for beginners to grasp, and yet at the same time it is often said to be THE most important in practice. I feel it is crucial for each of us to understand at least something about what this term involves.

The Sanskrit word Bodhicitta translates to something like "Enlightenment Mind" or "Heart of Enlightenment," a dynamic rather than a static state (a process and not just a state), so perhaps a better translation is a "mind that strives for enlightenment for all beings." There is a compulsive element to the concept that is key here. The term Bodhicitta often is divided into two types, Relative Bodhicitta and Absolute Bodhicitta.

Relative Bodhicitta is the wish to help others, but Absolute Bodhicitta is a ceaseless and one-pointed striving to benefit others, a permanent attitude – a realization. "Enlightened Heart" is my favorite translation for the word Bodhicitta. We usually speak of the mind being enlightened, but the heart must be too. Bodhicitta is the heart-center of enlightenment. It grasps us at the heart level and drives us to help realize enlightenment for all beings, including ourselves. Bodhicitta is the deep urge to help others realize what they (and we) already are.

Bodhicitta is another of those concepts that (like recognition of the mind's true nature) we can only guess at what it means until we realize it. Initially, we have no direct knowledge of what Bodhicitta is like until it dawns on us, so there is a bit of a vicious circle here. Of course we read about it, hear it

spoken of in teachings, and do our best to get a "sounds-like" idea of it going in our mind, but beyond that, the simple truth is that we just don't know that much about Bodhicitta when we first start out.

One thing we can know is that all of the great dharma teachers place Bodhicitta at the tip of the top of what we each need for our journey to enlightenment, so we can't just ignore it. The great Bokar Rinpoche, in my opinion, said it best:

"Bodhicitta is the electricity of spiritual practice. If it is cut, nothing works anymore. Animated with bodhicitta, all ordinary activity, all works in the world become a path to awakening."

So Bodhicitta is more of a drive or compulsion for enlightenment, not for ourselves, but, primarily for everyone else. We can make a patchwork quilt of ideas as to what Bodhicitta is, but the truth of it is that those ideas don't add up to experiencing it. In this case, indeed, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts we put together in our head. So how then do we get it?

In my understanding, Relative Bodhicitta is a direct result of the gradual process of detachment that results in the ensuing rise of compassion. Bodhicitta is a fruition of practice, not something we have (or are aware of) in the beginning. And it seems that the arising of Absolute Bodhicitta is the natural result of what is called "Recognition," realizing the true nature of the mind, a quite significant realization event. Without "Recognition," Absolute Bodhicitta is not possible. That is my understanding.

Rather than frustratingly attempt to generate Absolute Bodhicitta or pretend a "sounds like this" compassion, IMO, our time is better spent taking what steps we can toward realizing Recognition and the true nature of the mind. However, this typically involves finding a teacher to guide us, learning basic Shamata meditation, and then have our teacher instruct us in Vipassana (insight) and finally Mahamudra meditation, which eventually involves the pointing out (until we get it) of the true nature of the mind. After that, Absolute Bodhicitta will arise of its own accord. This at least is, to my understanding, the quickest and most effective way to achieve true or Absolute Bodhicitta.

Absolute Bodhicitta is the incandescence to full-flame of the spark of compassion that naturally occurs when we realize (Recognition) that not only do we all have Buddha Nature, but all we have to do is remove our obscurations to actualize it. When we realize this, we can't help but be electrified (as Bokar Rinpoche puts it) and driven to share this good news. Indeed, it is the best possible news for all of us.

Absolute Bodhicitta, once arisen, gets us up in the morning, stays with us through the day, and makes us not want to waste time sleeping at night -- that idea.

VAJRAPANI REDUX

September 15, 2019

This blog may not interest anyone but me, but here it is nevertheless. It is a bit of a ramble, but it's been coming up for weeks, so why not share it.

The Bodhisattva Vajrapani, to me, was something I reached for early-on in the dark of my ignorance of the dharma. I didn't know what I was touching into, but somehow it just felt right. And I pursued it. Eventually, I shared my wish to get close to Vajrapani (and what he represents) with my main dharma teacher. And I asked why there were no empowerments for Vajrapani, who stands at the right hand of Amitabha Buddha in the five Buddha families. Rinpoche responded by not only agreeing to give the Vajrapani empowerment, but to travel to our dharma center and offer the empowerment here for the first time, which he did. How wonderful!

The particular empowerment Rinpoche gave was taken from a cycle of empowerments put together by the Ninth Karmapa, Wangchug Dorje. It was a wrathful form of Vajrapani called "Dorje Tumpo." Since our dharma center was a publishing arm of KTD Monastery, we translated and published a Vajrapani sadhana in pecha format (Tibetan rectangular book) for that Vajrapani empowerment, complete with a dark blue foil-stamped cover.

And I did that practice for many years, completing the formal requirements for that practice, including the lung, empowerment, instructions, and mantra recitations, all 1,200,000 of them. In addition, I then travelled (with my wife Margaret and young son Michael Andrew) to India, where Goshir Gyaltsap Rinpoche at his monastery in Ralang, Sikkim was kind enough to personally give just the three of us (and our dear friend and guide Ngodup Burkhar) the Dorje Tumpo empowerment. Gyaltsap Rinpoche is considered the living emanation of Vajrapani in our lineage. I had written to him for years and, since he did not travel, we travelled to meet with him.

And finally, I was even asked by my teacher to teach this practice to a group of students in the main shrine room at KTD Monastery on Mount Guardian above Woodstock, NY. I also did this.

However, somewhere along there (after some years of Vajrapani practice) I realized that part of my attraction to Vajrapani was the fierceness of the dharma protectors. I kind of got off on that. Rinpoche and I had a good laugh over my fixation and this led to my putting the Vajrapani practice on the back burner for a while; I took up the Chenresik mantra instead, “Om Mani Padme Hum.” LOL.

Now, years have passed and I have matured in my dharma practice to where I realize that those elements of Vajrapani practice (despite my fixation) are very much a part of me and always were. I was correct in identifying with Vajrapani. In particular, the power of protecting what needs protecting, intrinsic to Vajrapani, something I have been doing all of my life, especially small animals and later American music and film culture.

Vajrapani means “vajra in the hand,” “Channa Dorje” in Tibetan or simply “Chak Dor” for short. I’m not going to attempt to document all the meanings of Vajrapani as the textbooks describe him, but rather describe what I identify with about this particular Bodhisattva. And I believe I am over my fixation on this Bodhisattva dharma-protector. Beneath all that was a real identification.

For one, I identify with Vajrapani’s activity and getting things done. I have always considered myself to belong to the Karma Dhyani Buddha family of the North, and Amoghassiddhi. I am a fierce doer of whatever I set my mind to, quickly removing all obstacles to accomplishing whatever I concentrate on. Of course, that has not worked as for my becoming enlightened... at least not yet. LOL. My life has been as an archivist, protecting and preserving popular culture, such as music, film, rock-concert posters, astrology, and so on.

I seem to be removing the more glamorous (to me) veneer of my former Vajrapani deity practice and finding underneath that I actually am one with the description of the activity of

Vajrapani. I did not expect to revisit this, but here I am. Why do I bring it up? Because it just naturally came up in the last few months. I don't have to imagine myself as Vajrapani; I realize that I already am some form of his emanation in actuality.

My Bodhisattva name, was personally given to me by my Root Guru when I asked for it. Rinpoche thought for a few days and gave me the name "Chönyi Rangdrol," which means "Self-Liberating Dharmata" or "Self-Liberating Nature of the Mind." My refuge name is Dhondup Dawa, "Moon of Accomplishment."

I had a couple of strokes in the last years, which wiped out everything I had accumulated through my attachments and fixations, at least for a while, but my affinity with Vajrapani always just popped back up. I am that.

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

September 23, 2019

I'm home, but still working my way back into the present from this weekend, the "present" being the here and now here at home. So many things to do; and, it's not from any mess I made or things I left undone, but rather various learning curves I now find myself embarked on and thoughts to think, which I will get to presently. The biggest one is learning the new Apple iPhone 11 Pro and all of the camera accessories and apps that it entails.

It's not that I am giving up my other cameras, but more like I want to open a new series of videos that, for lack of better words, I am calling "Short Takes." And these would be little vignettes I want to make, a series of many things, like how to use beads (a mala), cooking tempeh, or photo tips, and perhaps many other short instruction-videos or even just fun videos that I could enjoy making.

As for the spiritual front, well, I'm taking a step back to get a wider view. There is a lot there to work through and I'm working through it. However, it's beyond deep, IMO. And beyond deep is the great wide sky above, as time has shown me that beyond tight is loose, just as the baby floats in the womb, surrounded by its fluid.

And beyond the nitty-gritty is whatever embraces it, including everything else. It is good to have integrity, to be locked into the nitty-gritty until there is no more inner to get into. And then what? IMO, that's where the end of inner is "out," to come out of, as I wrote in this little poem from 1970.

IN OR OUT

"In" is not within the "out,"
And "out" without the "in."

No,
"In" is without the "out,"
And "out" within the "in."

In translation, all this poem is saying is that life is not bottomless and at its deepest, there is no where to go but up.

Or, as my daughter May wrote in one of her wonderful songs called "Rise Up Singing," the line:

"You know, trouble ain't built to last."

In other words, on the other side of dark is light. Something I wrote back in 1967 as I was going through some kind of spiritual rebirth experience perhaps says it best:

"I can clearly see all that clouds this stream of consciousness is but a searching, is itself but a frowning, a looking to see, a pause and hesitation that, caught and unfurled in the eddies of time, finding nothing, becomes clear and, laughing, I leave it go clear and turn from a darkening or dimming of my mind to light.

And it came to pass, and I let it pass."

“BE A CHILD OF ILLUSION”

September 24, 2019

The deconstruction of reality, reality as an illusion, is just a thought, an intellectual conception, when we first hear of it. I am reminded of the poem by William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” and the lines:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”

Of course, my use of it here is not related to Yeat’s poem and purpose at all. I am drawn to the part “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold” as it relates (at least in my mind) to what we call “reality,” and its center which cannot hold, either.

Reality was never “real” in the first place. We can see this in the concept of reification, where we constantly gild the lily and shore up reality to our liking. That should (or could) be pretty clear to all of us. However, I am (or trying to) point beyond reification by us to the very fabric of reality as we have never not known it otherwise.

I shouldn’t use the phrase “gild the lily,” because that gives the impression that the “real” reality is just gilded by reification to make it more than it is. While that is partially true, the reality which we reify or gild, itself, is just a fabrication. And so, it’s not a matter of a veneer, layer upon layer, of reification or unreality on what IS real. Nothing is real in the first place, in the sense of being permanent or self-existent.

This sense of “gilding” or putting veneer on what we have itself is a poor analogy. There is nothing self-existing to begin with that we can reify. It’s all made up out of thin air, so to speak. As the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa said:

“The bad news is that,
We are falling through the air,
Without a parachute.
The good news is that,
There is no ground.”

That's the idea here, that what we imagine is veneer or the result of reification on our part, is just the tip-of-the-top of the problem. Everything was always an illusion, long before this birth we are living. And so, if we want to deconstruct that, we best keep on going until it, all and everything, has been deconstructed. And that reaches back to forever.

And so, the Buddhist chant of "everything is an illusion" means just that, "EVERYTHING." Intellectually conceptualizing this thought is small exercise compared to realizing it or even coming close. If we are feeling insecure, well we should, although I always have asked this question myself. If we have never known security, how do we know we don't have it and are thus insecure? Tell me that, please.

If, as Trungpa Rinpoche, said "There is no ground," but just the "falling through the air," how did we ever come to imagine what we have never had or experienced "permanency," i.e. being permanently existing.

I don't want to be overly dramatic, but this question and the entire subject is not generally a topic of realization, but at best mere speculation. Many of us working with the Lojong dharma practices know the slogan:

"In post-meditation, be a Child of Illusion."

We are encouraged to not further reify our existence, but instead to realize it for what it is: reality itself is reification! And what is that? That is what I am writing about here, imagining this illusion that we all experience in Samsara is itself anything but a construction, something to practice or imagined.

However, the slogan says "BE a child of illusion," which to my mind means to realize the nature of reality itself to be illusory. The operative word is REALIZE. How can we reify an illusion? It's like the trace of a bird in an empty sky.

More on this in another blog.

ALL THE WORLD A STAGE?

September 25, 2019

An image that that I find communicates to me the essence of my stroke experience is that of an empty theater stage. You know, bare floors, perhaps a single light up in the catwalks, no hanging scenery, and no players, not even myself, and, above all, no entertainment.

Originally, the way I saw my stroke experience was as if I was out somewhere in a barren salt flat or snow-covered tundra, with a single light (like the sun) high overhead and very, very bright. It was so bright that I could not bear to look at it directly. And so, I sought the shadows of being busy, keeping my head down, and doing my best to ignore the light by endlessly doing things. I had never seen the light before, although it apparently has been here all my life. And I did not want to be alone with it.

The light was actually “reality” or whatever we can say is going on here in Samsara, but I could not bear to look directly at it. In my case, the light was the LACK of entertainment. That’s the basic idea early-on.

And then, over time, I found that the analogy of a bright light on a barren plain was just too limiting or did not quite lend itself to the reality which was dawning on me, that the bright light was a more a metaphor for the total LACK of entertainment. Now, think about this please. We are constantly entertained or entertaining this or that. We are busy! And this is where the photos of an empty stage come into play.

What the stage is empty OF is all of the trappings of a performance or show and especially lacking is me as lead actor, not to mention the other players and the sheer entertainment of it all, which is what a stage is for. And so, although through dharma study and practice I am familiar with the concept of attachment and fixation, another and overwhelming term that occurred to me after this stroke experience is “entertainment.” We are (or at least I am) totally

entertained and used to it. Either that or I suffer the lack of it. At least, so it seemed to me.

What I missed after the stroke was Entertainment, being entertained or otherwise busy, anything but face the bright light of the empty stage, which glaring-bright light was in fact nothing else but the utter lack of “entertainment” itself. I had none. I was not entertained at all, but left all alone by myself with, you guessed it, no entertainment whatsoever. And it was devastating to not feel entertained all the time. Ouch! I never experienced or saw that before in all my life.

And so, readers: obviously, for me to be devastated, I must mean something different here than you understand by the simple phrase “lack of entertainment.” And this is where it is going to get subtle, because you may lack that same stroke-experience and probably never have had anything similar happen. Neither had I, until I had it. And I don’t wish it on anyone, including myself!

In a word, that is because, at least from my point of view at the time, it is all entertainment. Previous to my stroke, like all of us, I assumed entertainment to be just that, the cream at the top of our daily experience and not something (like an addiction) we had to have “all of the time.”

However, when I was stripped of my Self, my past, my future and trapped in this immediate moment (which yogis like to extol), I felt naked as a J-Bird, totally exposed, and did not know what to do with myself, except to keep my head down in busyness all the time. I did not dare to look up or around. If I did, I would see that light.

Without entertainment, I didn’t know what to do with myself, because my attachments, fixations, and entertainment were my required filter to life as I knew it. Of course, I wouldn’t have copped to that before the stroke because I kept any thought of entertainment as quite separate from the serious business of being “Me.” As mentioned, I liked entertainment, but had not realized I was addicted to it beyond measure. Looking at it now, it’s all entertainment!

And then, to have it wiped out in a single moment was a little much to, well, entertain. LOL. I had always thought and always assumed that my attachments, fixations, and

entertainments were something like veneer on the top of what was my “essence.” And beneath all that veneer was the real-reality of life. And so it was, as much real-reality as it is, which is about none. LOL.

The problem is that, as the Buddhists say, this life is an illusion, a dream that we had and are having, as opposed to a “Reality” – something permanent and more real or substantial. And perhaps that is why we perpetually reify everything we like or dislike, that it might be (or we make it) more solid and less like the dream that it is.

And for many decades I had handled those dharma concepts fairly well. However, what if you were to wake up and realize that you are in a play, a theatrical production, in which you were the star. And what if that play or dream were to be over and closed-out? What is left? LOL. That’s the \$64,000 question, if anyone remembers back to the old game show.

What I realized from the stroke is that aside from the dream and theater version of me, myself, and I, I didn’t know what to do with life. When the character I play in the theater of life is done or vacated, and all of the clothes, makeup, props, and fellow actors have gone home, just what am I supposed to do? Apparently, I had no idea. LOL.

Only, thanks to my stroke, I got stripped of all that entertainment before death and not at death. And no, I can’t say whether that is what happens at death, although when I had a translator explain it to my dharma teacher (who is 96 years old and sharp as a tack), his response was that my stroke event was good preparation for after death. And my response to that was, whoa! I’m not ready for that. LOL.

I better get ready. (to be continued).

WAVES ON A BEACH: TOUCHING IN

September 26, 2019

All of this reflection from my stroke got me to thinking, always a dangerous activity. And then, I remembered a similar event to my stroke back in 1967, although it was not health related, and I found a journal entry from back then, call it the first wave of what I have been going through lately. It shows me that these thoughts are not a singleton or just “health related”, but a verity. Nothing changes other than our forays into realization.

This is long, so please ignore this article if your time is short for reading, as I can't worry about that. Sorry. I'm trying to get this out for those who might need to read it. That journal entry from 1967 was the following. I was all of 25 years of age.

“To be relieved, finished, the one thing I had never expected. Maybe at life's long end of eighty or ninety years, sure; it might make sense. But now, in the prime of my powers, in the middle of my life? To be relieved of duty? Are you kidding me?”

“No one ever told me about it. I heard no talk of it. I didn't read about it anywhere. Am I the only one? Am I to remain silent? Who is even interested? No one seems to notice.”

“Relieved of duty in the middle of the war, I must be a traitor. I must have made some terrible mistake, to be relieved. I mean, I looked forward to a life long-filled with searching and suffering. And now this, this terrible guilt of non-involvement, of really not caring like I used to care, and I would rather die than not care. Caring did not mean love to me; it meant worry and suffering continued. To be carefree; this I never thought to ask for. I had lost my edge, my suffering.”

“It is like someone turned off the engine, as far as we personally are concerned. All at once, this great silence and sense of peace, and when you first begin to hear the silence, it terrifies. We can now see younger persons still driving and pushing their birth, yet we don't feel that old drive as we once did.”

“There is the feeling that we are somehow washed up, finished. We have lost that old push or “thing” which made us, ourselves. And all of this not spoken about, unmentioned in public conversation, simply ignored. As I can see, many just cannot accept this change, and wander stunned in a stupor and state of shock for years, or fill their lives with noise and activity — anything to drown the sense of silence and rest that they feel.”

“Lifted out of our life’s sorrow, we refuse to acknowledge the incredible and obvious lightness of being we now feel. Unburdened, enlightened, we feel no gravity or weight. Up until now, life beckoned and lured me running fast through time’s meanings. What does it mean? What does it all mean? Where is it all leading to? What exactly is the point? And then, this: Silence.”

[Excerpt from the book:
Astrology of the Heart: Astro-Shamanism]

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-boo.../Astrology-of-the-Heart.pdf>

I am going to continue on with this view of life and reality as pure entertainment and the vision of the empty theater stage that resulted from my stroke. It’s a useful metaphor.

We all know of the Self, even if we don’t know ourselves, etc. LOL. And dharma folks, at least in America, find the Self being discussed often, usually as a necessary tool and sometimes as a necessary evil. However, that view of our Self does not always include the understanding of the Self as a filter, the rose-colored glasses that we also see through.

In a word, everything that we see (or is seen) is a mental construction. We have mentally constructed life as we see it, as far back as we go or civilization (or whatever) has gone.

We are more than comfortable with the concept of a filter. For example, looking through rose-colored glasses at the world, but not so familiar with the idea that everything we see through those glasses is all there is to see, meaning that’s all that we CAN see because we are limited by our filters.

In other words, we GET that our filter is a construct, but it could be easy to miss the fact that the world we see through our filters (which filters are a construct) is also a construct, i.e.

that it is harder to realize that the world itself as we know is also a construct and nothing but a construct or illusion.

It's better than a hall of mirrors, the illusions that our life is based on, a veritable house of cards. It's like a hologram looking at a hologram. All of this should give us a whiff of emptiness, if not a straight shot to the gut.

It's as if Pinocchio did not know he was not a real boy. I know that many of you know of what I am describing here, but I question the degree of involvement you are aware of. It's not a duality, with our looking through rose-colored glasses at a constructed illusionary universe, but rather a constructed "being" itself looking at a constructed universe, a hologram gazing at a hologram, an android world. That is "emptiness of permanent being."

The old game of Pick-UP-Sticks, like getting to the heart of an onion, ends with nothing there at all. And yet, that very emptiness is eternally arising in all appearances.

Appearances are the emptiness arising and arisen.

What kind of duality is it if both the subject and the object are empty appearances that are empty through and through? Is that not a unity or non-dual? Is not non-duality the exhaustion of duality?

The jig is up when we finally exhaust the end of the differences between subject and object. It must vary from person to person, yet the result is identical. It's like when Mahamudra and Dzogchen paths, while different, have the same result. We can only look so long and so far. When a glove is turned inside out, the inside is out, whether the glove is large or small. That's the beauty of the dharma for all, that it is so egalitarian.

I am trying to share something here that I believe can be realized by readers, and I am not attempting to go anywhere else with it or take it further. In other words, this is the realization from my recent stroke beginning to roll in like waves on a beach. It may appear meaningless, for which I apologize, but not for me. IMO, it is the end of meaning and directionality once and for all. The meaning has run its course, run out.

Or, it's like with the Saturn return at 29.4 years, when the planet Saturn completes its 360-degree orbit around the Sun and begins going over the same ground for a second time. Something is freed to wake up and just steps away. It has completed itself. The stickiness and cloyingness of fixation becomes un-fixated and naturally liberated. It loses its hold on us and we are free.

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

September 27, 2019

I am sure some of you wonder why I drone on and on about this particular incident in my life. I would like to try to explain what is more important about my recent stroke than the stroke itself.

What follows is kind of a step-by-step explanation. You tell me if it makes sense. And much of this is about the Self (our attachments, fixations, and entertainments), which happens to be the lens through which everything we have and know is filtered to us. This filter is the accumulated mass of whatever we have become attached to, fixated on, and reified, layer on layer, over all the time there is and has been up to now.

And, it is within this accumulated mass of accretion that we reside and have made our home, even if we are not aware of the fact. Is it any wonder that we can't see out beyond our Self if we are only used to looking further into and embellishing this mass?

It's mostly what we BELIEVE we are, instead of what we actually are, of which we may have little to no idea. As mentioned, how can we look outward if we normally only look inward (and through) at what we have come to call the Self. The sum-total of all our attachments and reification is the glue that holds the Self together. And it is with that Self that we live and to which we give most of our attention. And it is through the window of the Self that we view the world to a great extent.

Much is made of the Self, as we all know, especially here in the west. In Tibet and the east, from my travels, the Self is not considered as important. What I have found more interesting or at least more approachable than the Self is the concept of "Entertainment."

The Self may remain somewhat of a mystery to many of us, but as for Entertainment, we all seem to have a pretty good idea of what that is. And, at least in my recent stroke, concerns for myself and its attachments went out the window from the first moment. In a flash, in one second, I was

isolated into the immediate present (for the most part) completely. There was no remorse for a Self lost; there just was no Self to speak of.

It took time, but what gradually and deliberately did arise or remain from the stroke-event was the awareness on my part of the LACK of any entertainment to comfort me, with the result that I felt exposed and naked to an unprecedented degree. I was without my normal cloak of entertainments.

Perhaps you could call that a "Self," but it never occurred to me to use that term. In fact, from that moment of the stroke onward, I found the traditional concept of a Self as I understand it not very useful, and instead, the experience of entertainment, of being entertained (or in short, being busy) made real sense to me. I desperately tried to hide in my busyness. It occurs to me I have been doing this all my life!

And, primarily, the shock from the stroke experience was over the LACK of being entertained or busy, and not from any sense of attachment, fixation, and all of that which is normally used to define the Self. Those things were totally gone in an instant and the moment itself (the immediate moment), was all that there was or close to it.

I was isolated (even felt trapped) in the immediate moment and unable to access or dwell within the pretense of entertainment as I always had up to that point. The net result of all this is that I gradually realized that my lifelong sense of busyness, that I had always viewed as benign and of value, also prevented me from realizing what the lack of this kind of busyness or entertainment was like. Entertainment was not just the tip-of-the-top of the pyramid of what I valued, it was the whole pyramid itself.

And I did not like what it was like to be without my entertainment to lose myself in. In fact, I did everything in my power to avoid facing the LACK of anything entertaining and to seek out and return to my normal sense of entertainment. It was only over time that I very gradually discovered and became aware of the fact that my entertainment or keeping busy all the time was a way to avoid whatever this bright light (or lack of entertainment) was all about.

There was nothing wrong with the “bright light,” so to speak, other than the absence of the entertainment in which I habitually had been immersed. As mentioned, I had never thought of my constant busyness (and getting things done) as an escape or avoidance. I was proud of it. However, the stroke introduced an alternative where before there was none.

That lack of entertainment I became aware of and the awareness that made that possible was what I would call THE Awareness that is always present in all of us. And so, which of these two alternatives would I best credit, my habitual sense of wanting to be entertained or the Awareness that is what dharma study and practice is all about?

Keep in mind, that while the stroke voided my Self, attachments, fixations, entertainment, etc., what it did not touch in any way was the Awareness that is aware of life itself. Those were my choices.

And, as mentioned, I chose entertainment without giving it a second thought, because the naked Awareness was more than I could endure, and that sent me into the shadows of busyness and entertainment. So, there you have the idea. Consider it please.

It's obvious that aside from all my habitual entertainment, there is the Awareness that I have studied and practiced through dharma all these years. However, it seems I like to eat my cake and have it too, so to speak. Or, from the comfort of my Lazy-Boy chair of entertainment, I like to dabble in the more pure Awareness of the mind itself. However, there is a disconnect here and I was forced to become aware of it for the first time in my life. And that was quite a realization.

And, its not like it was a snap decision, although it was a snap (stroke) event. I am still sorting it all out, but, as mentioned, from the comfort of my entertainment chair as it reanimates itself. I don't find myself leaving the shadows and withstanding the light of Awareness, because it is (and was) too painful. Terrifying! And that fact also is painful to behold, how habituated I am to entertainment and afraid of the lack of it.

So, this apparent health-event concealed (and revealed) something greater than the medical part of itself. It opened up to me something even more important than the stroke itself, something I am still in the process of sorting out and sharing here with you.

GLY-AMERICAN DHARMA?

September 28, 2019

America is not Tibet. That's one more thing we Americans have to realize along with realizing the true nature of the mind. LOL. The dharma can appear somewhat august and "Recognition" (much less enlightenment) may be beyond our reach at the present. Who says? And hopefully, "Recognition" is not beyond our reach in this lifetime. LOL.

Zen Buddhism is august-enough, as well, but it very definitely has a sense of humor. I am not suggesting to break ranks or run afoul of the dignity of the dharma. However, I am suggesting that this is America and this is the United States, so it could be helpful to look around us.

Is it off-center to imagine that an American or western dharma will reflect America or the west and not Tibet? Again: take a look around you at America. It is hard to believe that dharma in America will not be American to the core. Tibet, for example, was a far cry from India where the Buddha lived and the dharma there developed in a Tibetan fashion, yet still remained pure.

I say this because my gut is that the formality of dharma in America as received from India, Tibet, Nepal, Japan, and China, appears to me as not what I would imagine if the dharma arose in this country, which it is now doing. Can the Dharma be American and not look like us?

LOL.

I suggest we look for an American dharma as not something coming from overseas, but as something coming from within us right now, just as we are, Americans, with the good, the bad, and the ugly. Your thoughts?

CO-EMERGENCY

September 28, 2019

“Appearances are not only empty,
They are the emptiness arising.”

Consider that, but for Samsara, we would be in Nirvana (Enlightenment). In other words, like the dark side of the Moon that we never see, Samsara is the complete other side of Nirvana, which is why the two are called connate (co-emergent). You can't have one without the other. Moreover, the dharma texts tell us that nirvana is nothing other than realized Samsara. And the realization of the two as one is a process that has to be done by each one of us individually.

And its not that when we realize Samsara as Nirvana, we are suddenly going to be in some other place, like heaven or out-of-here, where we are now. There is no escape from or other place to be than realized Samsara, which is Nirvana, i.e. the other side of the same coin. No matter how you put that puzzle together, it comes out connate, as was described above.

For that fact, we must each prepare. I remember well, one time when we were visited for a week at our dharma center by one of the four Heart Sons of the Karmapa. We drove him and his Omze (chant master) to a stand of virgin White Pines not far from where we live. His comment while picnicking with us under these very tall trees was “Very nice Samsara.” And just FYI, as we drove home through the dense national forest on two-track roads, a mini-tornado arose, one with fierce winds and driving rains that made seeing through the windshield of our car practically impossible. In all this, I happened to glance over and there were His Eminence and his attendant totally at rest, sleeping like babies. The contrast did not escape me.

So, what IS this Samsara that we are caught up in, and more or less trapped within? Well, it's not Nirvana, that's for sure, yet it has to potentially be Nirvana, because Nirvana is said to simply be Samsara that has been completely realized.

And the usual refrain is that Samsara is the sum-total of our attachments and fixations that comprise what we are involved in. However, the way it usually is presented and what I long took to be the truth is that beneath all those attachments and fixations was something called Nirvana, with Samsara as steel plating over gold. Yet, over time I have come to understand that was a mistake – a “miss” take.

There is nothing beneath, on top of, or behind Samsara, nothing at all. Samsara is as empty of any permanent being as everything else. What changes or transforms Samsara into Nirvana is our attitude, the way we view what we want to call what’s there, Samsara, or whatever the name.

Yet, what I have so vividly learned from my recent health event is that there is no gilding or veneer laid over the gold of any “truth” underneath it all. Instead, Samsara is, through and through, of one piece, behind which is, like layers of an onion, nothing at all but its inherent emptiness of being. This concept took me time to realize but realize it I could not avoid. And god knows I tried. LOL.

And, although it is empty of actual being, Samsara is fully apparent. In other words, Samsara is the emptiness itself appearing, as real as we can imagine and manage to make it. And we do. That’s what reification is all about, making something more real than it actually is, ascribing permanence to what is essentially impermanent or interdependent.

And, Samsara is not Nirvana. We all know that much! LOL. Then, dharma practice becomes the process of realizing (transforming) Samsara as Nirvana, however that can be done. And, apparently there are many dharma practices to achieve this. In my understanding, that is the mechanics of the process of realization.

I have only one thing to add, and this from my own experience. And that is that Samsara is totally immersive, all-inclusive, and not any kind of veneer. If there is such a thing as solid gold, then Samsara is solid Samsara, through and through. This I did not expect and was completely mistaken about.

It is Samsara where I have lived all my life, liking it as best I can. It is Samsara that is the filter (my rose-colored glasses)

through which I see all and everything and always have. And it is Samsara that I identify as my home and sponsor. I did not even have a single clue that there was anything else beyond it. And that, my dharma friends, is something I wish you would consider.

Any thoughts of Nirvana, of enlightenment, and every kind of blue-sky I can imagine was already owned and paid for by Samsara long ago. As the Buddhists point out, Nirvana is not something we once had and then fell away from, like the doctrines of original sin. We have never, not ever, known anything but Samsara. Even our ideas of a Nirvana are Samsaric from top to bottom. How we can ever get beyond Samsara is difficult to even imagine.

It took the heart of my stroke to deny me access to the past and future, leaving me not anywhere but in the immediate present. I could not find or get back into the attachments and pure entertainment that was so habitual for me. And so, I had no choice but to become aware of that which I was never aware of before, i.e. the complete lack of the entertainment that I was so habituated to.

That “complete lack” was the bright light that I desperately thought to escape from back into the entertainment in which I had been embedded as far back as I can remember. However, try as I might, for many weeks, I could not get beyond this immediate instant of the present moment. I tried and tried and tried, while twisting in the wind, so to speak.

And to avoid that present immediate moment, with its total lack of entertainment, I kept busier than I have ever been, busy doing anything rather than to be alone with myself in the complete emptiness of my lack of entertainment. I kept my head down in busyness and turned away from that lack of entertainment that left me alone and feeling most vulnerable. I hid in the shadows.

And the takeaway from all this is a growing awareness of how embedded I am (and have always been) in the embracing folds of Samsara. Samsara is everything (and the only thing) I have ever known and (apparently) I have no intention of giving it up. Even to be without it for the relatively short time

after my stroke was one of the most terrifying experiences I have ever had. Period.

The question remains as to what to do about it? Certainly, the realization of something beyond Samsara can't be walked back. That genie is out of the bottle. That Samsara is a construction and an illusion cannot be denied. Samsara's hold on me weakens, but the sheer habit of this constant entertainment is hard to deny, if only because I am not comfortable without it! What really hurts is that it's my choice. I choose Samsara.

It's like leaving my comfortable home and volunteering to go to the north pole and live in an igloo. Yes, I can see how I'm trapped in Samsara, but I have yet to find the oxygen in being without it. I live and breathe Samsara. That idea.

And so, any "realization" is like a luxury I cannot afford and my excursions away from Samsara turn into a pumpkin before I can return home to my entertainments. I can't find my glasses and when I do, to my surprise, I'm stuck looking through Samsara once again at the world. It's what I know best.

This is going to take some time.

THE IPHONE 11 PRO MAX IN USE

September 30, 2019

After being laughed at by pro photographers for taking the new iPhone 11 Pro Max seriously as a camera I can use (along with all of the more accepted cameras we all know and love), I have persevered and with great interest. For one, the iPhone is light enough to slip into my pocket, which I do. That's enough for starters, but of course I gravitate toward doing the kind of camera work I always have done and that involves some accessories, so let's start there.

As mentioned, I am involved with vetting the gear I find useful for using the Apple iPhone 11 Pro with its three onboard cameras. Of course, I can (and do) carry around the iPhone and take photos. However, my own jitteriness makes it too unstable for excellent still-life shots that I like to take. LOL.

Next, I mistakenly assumed that a monopod would help to stabilize the camera-work I like to do. However, the good monopods are still heavy to carry around, so I searched around to find the lightest carbon-fiber monopod as I could. I found one that is under one pound, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a pound, the Neewer Carbon Fiber Monopod.

However, when I tried about five different monopods that I have (heavy or not), what I find is that monopods, although they help, still are prone to wiggle and shakiness, more than I can allow, so I was back to square one.

My next step was to look for small, lightweight tripods that could fill the bill. I looked at everything from those ultra-thin tube-tripods that have elastic cord inside them so that you kind of shake out the legs, and then very small tripods, those with just very narrow tubes, and on and on.

What I found out from all of that is that these very thin tube tripods themselves are not really that steady and have problems of their own. This led me to looking at tripods in the range of strength I am more used to, and I already have a bunch. Yet, of course I had to buy one more. LOL.

However, if they are 3-4 lbs., even that is a lot to haul around for use with a smart phone. And so, to bite the bullet, I have found a small Gitzo carbon-fiber tripod that weighs a little over two pounds. That seems doable, and I tried it out during a typical outing.

The small tripod, which weighs 2.5 lbs., is the Gitzo GT-1545-T (Traveler). I removed the center column to keep the tripod lighter. It is still plenty tall enough for my work. And I have a ball-head from another small tripod, the AOKA KB-20, which has an Arca-Swiss clamp. All told, that weight is very manageable. In addition, I have a very tiny video head (as an alternate) that allows me to move the iPhone smoothly. I also have a DJI 3-gimbal hand-held device (DJI Osmo Mobile 3) that I can use for video (or stills), but the tripod is my first choice.

As for tripod heads for the iPhones themselves, the story is similar. There are a lot of little tripod mounts for iPhone out there, often very inexpensive. However, they seem to be made out of cheap plastic and, worse, are cobbled together so that parts are “clunky” and the haptics of them are, well, terrible. I hate to be stuck using such junk, even if it is inexpensive.

And many of these cheap tripod heads have spring-loaded clamps for the iPhone. Sounds like a nice thing thought I, yet having to pry open and then close the clamps when doing or holding other things, became a pain after using them for a time or two. It is not surprising that after a short while, I yearned for a simple clamp that we tighten with a knob like I am used to.

I now have an expensive head for iPhones from Really Right Stuff. It is totally well-made as most RRS products are. I seem to never learn. Buy good equipment right off and stop trying to save a buck. Now I have a good RRS head and a handful of ones that are not good, but still cost me money. They sit on the shelf.

RAW IMAGES

Moving on to raw images with the iPhone 11 Pro Max, they are available. However, you have to (at this point) use one of several apps. And while Adobe LR Mobile is said to be the

best, at this point Adobe LR does not support all three cameras in the iPhone 11 Pro. However, ProCamera, an app for the iPhone that costs about \$8, does support them and can store them as TIF files or DNG.

I find ProCamera very useful and easy to use. And most of all, I find raw images absolutely wonderful to have on the iPhone 11 Pro Max.

EXPORTING VIDEO AND STILLs

I did have a lot of trouble getting large videos (like 11 GB) off my new iPhone and it took almost three days for me to sort it out. I tried to export to DropBox, but that did not work for large files. Finally, I had to use iCloud. I exported to iCloud and then downloaded these large files to my computer, after which I could place them on DropBox or wherever I wanted.

All of the above begs the question of what the final image quality for these new phones will look like. Now that I have sorted out most of the accessories and process, I am ready to dig into that. It is important to know that the low ISO on the iPhone 11 Pro Max is something like 21 ISO and a higher ISO range of 3072 ISO (wide-angle lens). That low ISO is much lower than any other camera I own.

The image output size on this iPhone is 4032 x 3024, with cameras apertures of f/2.4 for the 13mm super-wide-angle lens, f/2/8 for the 26mm wide-angle lens, and f/2.0 for the 51mm telephoto. The front-facing lens is 24mm and f/2.2.

Also, I have a couple of Bluetooth remotes that allow me to trigger the camera to take a photo. I have tried the Square Jellyfish and the Zttopo Wireless Camera Control. Both work. You get two Zttopo (on Amazon) for about \$9.

Perhaps there are others serious users of the iPhone 11 Pro Max out there and we can discuss this very interesting (to me) portable camera!